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三秋縋
メディアワークス文庫

# Pain, Pain, Go Away

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# Chapter 1: A First Goodbye

Kiriko and I became penpals when I was 12 years old, in the fall.
A mere six months from graduation, I had to leave the elementary school I'd been attending because of my father's job.
That change of schools turned out to be the opportunity that made Kiriko and I get together.

My last day of school was at the end of October. I would be leaving town that same night.
It *should* have been an important day. But I had only two friends that I could really call friends, and one of them was too sick to attend, while the other was out on a family vacation.
So I was left to spend the day alone.

At the send-off party four days earlier, I'd gotten a bouquet of withering flowers with messages that all read the same way. And every time a classmate saw me, they gave me a look as if to say "Huh? You're still here?"
The classroom became an unbearable place to stay. I knew that I already didn't belong here.

Not a soul lamented that I was changing schools. That fact was a lonely one, but it also encouraged me.
I wouldn't be losing anything from this. In fact, it would provide me with new experiences and people to meet.

I'll fare better at my next school, I thought. If I turn out to change schools again, at least two or three people should be torn up about

it next time.

My last class came to an end. After putting my papers away in my desk, feeling like a boy left behind in a lonely classroom on Valentine's Day, I went pointlessly rummaging through my backpack. I wasn't mature enough to not get my hopes up that someone had left me some kind parting remarks.

Just as I was giving up on having any fond memories of this final day, I noticed there was someone standing in front of me.
She wore a blue pleated skirt and had skinny legs. I looked up, trying to conceal my nervousness.

It wasn't Sachi Aoyama, who'd secretly had my fancy since third grade. It wasn't Saya Mochizuki, who tilted her head and smiled at me whenever we met in the library.
Looking altogether too serious, it was Kiriko Hizumi, asking "Do you want to go home together?"

Kiriko was a memorable girl, with hair cut to the exact length to hang above her eyebrows.
She was shy, only ever talking in a whispery voice, wearing an awkward smile she looked ashamed to be having. Her grades were average, too, so she really didn't catch anyone's eye.

It was a total mystery why she, who had almost never held a conversation worth calling a conversation with me, came to talk to me today. I was secretly disappointed that it hadn't been Sachi Aoyama or Saya Mochizuki.

But I had no reason to refuse her, either. “Sure, I guess,” I told her, and she smiled. “Thanks,” she replied, head still lowered.

Kiriko didn’t say a word the entire trip home. She walked at my side looking incredibly nervous, and occasionally shot glances at me as if she had something to say.
I didn’t know what we could possibly talk about, either. What’s someone who’ll be out of here tomorrow supposed to say to someone who’s hardly even an acquaintance? Not to mention, I’d never walked home together with a girl my age before.
With much bashfulness between the both of us, we arrived at my house still having not said a single thing to each other.

“Well, bye.”
I shyly waved at Kiriko and turned to grab the doorknob. Then at last, she seemed to muster some resolve and grabbed my hand. “Wait.”
Thrown off by the touch of her cold fingers, I asked with excessive bluntness, “What?”

“Um, Mizuho, I have a request. Will you listen?”
I scratched the back of my neck, as I’m wont to do when I’m uneasy. “I mean, I’ll listen, but... I’m changing schools tomorrow. *Is* there anything I can do for you?”
“Yes. Actually, that’s why it’s only you who can do it.”

Staring bullets at my hand as she gripped it, she went on.
“I’ll write you letters, and I want you to reply to them. And then, um, I’ll reply back to those replies.”

I thought about what she was saying. “You mean, you want us to be penpals?”
“Y-Yeah. That’s the word,” Kiriko confirmed bashfully.
“Why me, though? It’d probably be more fun to do with someone you’re closer to.”
“Well, you can’t send a letter to someone who lives nearby, right? That’s boring. I’ve always wanted to send letters to someone far away.”
“But I’ve never written a letter in my life.”
“Then we’re even. Good luck to us both,” she said, shaking my hand up and down.
“Hey, hold on, you can’t ask me this out of the blue...”

In the end, though, I accepted Kiriko’s request. Having never written a letter worth calling a letter outside of New Year’s cards, the old-fashioned idea seemed fresh and interesting to me.
And getting such an earnest request from a girl my age got me so excited that I wasn’t about to turn her down.
She sighed with satisfaction. “I’m glad. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if you refused.”

After handing her a note with my new address, she smiled, said “Wait for my first letter,” and ran home with a speedy trot.
Didn’t even say goodbye. Clearly, her interest was in the letters I’d write, not the flesh-and-blood me.

As soon as I’d transferred to my new school, her letter came right away. “More than anything, I think we should know more about each other,” she wrote. “So first, let’s introduce ourselves.”

It was a bizarre thing - separated ex-classmates only now introducing themselves. But it wasn't as if there was anything else to write about, so I went along with the suggestion.

After some time being penpals with Kiriko, I made a discovery.
We'd never properly spoken before I changed schools, but going off what she wrote in her letters, Kiriko Hizumi seemed to have strikingly similar values to my own.

"Why do I *have* to study?" "Why is it *wrong* to kill people?" "What *is* "talent"?"
Early in our teaching, we both enjoyed rethinking everything from the basics like that in an attempt to give adults pause.
We also had an embarrassingly serious discussion about "love," which went as follows.

"Mizuho, what do you think about this "love" thing? My friends talk about it from time to time, but I still don't really understand what it means."

"I don't understand either. In Christianity, the single word "love" can mean four different kinds of love, and there are multiple loves in one in other religions as well, so it seems hopeless to even try. For example, what my mom feels for Ry Cooder is definitely love, but what dad feels for Alden cordovans is also love, and there's a kind of love in me sending letters to you, Kiriko. It's a really diverse thing."

"Thank you for that casual remark that made me very happy. What

you said made me realize that maybe the love I'm talking about and the love my friends are talking about have different definitions entirely. Maybe I should be wary of those girls talking so lightly of it. What I'm talking about is a more emotional, romantic love. That "thing" often seen in movies and books, but which I've never seen in reality, an entirely different thing from familial or sexual love."

"I'm still dubious about the actual existence of that "thing," myself. But if the "love" you speak of doesn't exist, then someone must have come up with it, which is a stunning thought. For many ages, love has been the cause of many beautiful paintings, songs, and stories. If it's only made-up, "love" may be humanity's greatest invention, or perhaps the world's kindest lie."

Etcetera.

In everything we talked about, our opinions were as close as if we were long-lost twins. Kiriko described that miracle as "like a class reunion of souls."
That description really stuck with me. A class reunion of souls.

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At the same time my relationship with Kiriko was deepening, I was finding myself unable to get used to my new elementary school.
And when I graduated from there and moved on to middle school, then began a truly lonely existence.
Not a single person to talk to in class, only minimal conversations in clubs, and naturally no one to talk about personal things with.

Relatively speaking, I actually had it better before I changed schools.

For Kiriko, though, everything seemed to take a turn for the better once she entered middle school, and her letters proved again and again that she was living very happily.
She told me how she'd made countless wonderful friends. How she'd stay late every day with her club friends talking about something or another. How she was chosen for the culture festival executive committee and could go into normally inaccessible rooms at the school. How she'd sneak onto the roof with her classmates and have lunch, then get scolded by the teachers. Etcetera.

I felt it would be awkward to respond to these letters with plain descriptions of my miserable circumstances. I didn't want to cause her any worry, and I would've hated to be thought of as weak.
Maybe if I had opened up to her with my problems, she would have been kind and listened. But I didn't really want that. I insisted on looking good in front of Kiriko.
So I wrote lies instead. My letters told of a fictional life of mine, so perfect and fulfilling so as not to be bested by hers.

Initially, it was no more than a bluff, but it gradually became my greatest joy. I suppose I had a love of acting that only needed awakening.
Leaving out anything that sounded too implausible, I wrote about the best school life I could muster without it deviating from the reality of being Mizuho Yugami. A second life created only for these letters. When I was writing letters to Kiriko, that was when I could

become my ideal.

In spring and summer and fall and winter, on sunny and cloudy and rainy and snowy days, I would write letters and deposit them in the mailbox on the corner of the street.
When a letter from Kiriko arrived, I would prudently cut open the envelope, bring it close to my face, lie down in bed, and relish the words while sipping coffee.

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A terrifying situation came up five years after we became penpals, the autumn when I was 17.
“I want to talk face to face,” Kiriko wrote.
“Some things, I just can’t bring myself to say in letters. I want us to look each other in the eyes and hear each other talk.”

This letter troubled me. Of course, I’d had the same desire to meet in person cross my mind. I would have loved to see how she’d changed in five years.
But it was obvious that if such a thing were to happen, everything I’d written in my letters would be exposed as lies. Gentle Kiriko wouldn’t condemn me for it, surely. But I was sure it would disappoint her.

I schemed to somehow become that fictional Mizuho Yugami for just a day, but even if I could briefly solidify all those lies, I knew I wouldn’t be able to hide my gloomy eyes and actions affected by years of loneliness, nor my lack of confidence. I regretted, all too

late, not having just lived a decent life all along.

In trying to think of a clever excuse to turn her down, weeks passed, and then a month.
One day, I supposed that it was best to just let our relationship fade away like this. Telling her the truth would forever end the comfortable relationship we had, and it was painful to keep sending letters while fearing my lies would be seen through.
As it happened, it was approaching exam cram season. So I resolved to give up on our relationship of five years, so quickly that it even surprised me.
If she was going to hate me either way, it seemed better to terminate things myself.

The month after the letter asking to meet in person came, another letter from Kiriko arrived. It was the first time I'd broken the tacit agreement that we would reply within five days of receiving a letter. She must have been worried by my lack of response.
But I didn't even open that letter. As expected, another one came a month after that, and I ignored it too. It pained me, certainly, but it was the only thing I could do.

The week after I gave up on our correspondence, I made a friend. Maybe I'd grown too reliant upon Kiriko and it got in the way of forming normal relationships, I thought.

Time passed, and I got out of my habit of checking the mail for her letters.
And that was how my relationship with Kiriko ended.

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It was my friend's death that led me to write to Kiriko again.

In the summer of my fourth year, Haruhiko Shindo, who I'd spent most of my time at college with, committed suicide.
I secluded myself in my apartment. I knew I was missing important credits that term and would have to repeat a year, but I didn't care. It didn't even feel like my business.

I felt little sadness for his death itself. There had been many signs.
Ever since I met him, Shindo had longed for death. He smoked three packs a day, took straight swigs of whiskey, and went out on his motorcycle night after night.
He'd watch New Hollywood films and repeatedly play back the all-too-quick deaths of the protagonists, sighing as if in a trance.

So when I was told of his death, I more or less thought "good for him." He was finally where he wanted to be. There wasn't a shred of regret in me to the tune of "I should've been nicer," or "I couldn't see that he was suffering."
Shindo, too, probably never thought of talking with me about his problems. No doubt, all he wanted was to have some ordinary days full of laughs, and then vanish from them just like that.

The problem, then, was that I was still here. Shindo not being there was a serious blow to me.
For better or worse, he was propping me up. He was lazier, more

desperate, more pessimistic than me, and similarly lacking in life goals, so having him there was a pretty big relief. I could look at him and go, “If a guy like that can live, I’ve gotta live too.”

His death pulled away an important foundation out from under me. I gained a vague dread for the outside world, becoming only able to go out from 2 to 4 AM.
If I forced myself to leave, my heart would start pounding, and I’d get dizzy and hyperventilate. At its worst, my limbs and face would go numb and cramp up.

Holed up in my room with the curtains closed, I’d drink and watch the movies Shindo adored. When I wasn’t doing that, I slept.
I longed for the days when I’d ride tandem with Shindo and we’d drive around. We did all kinds of stupid stuff. Pump coin after coin into games late at night in an arcade smelling of nicotine, go to the beach at night and come back home having done nothing at all, spend all day skipping stones on the river, ride around town blowing bubbles from the motorcycle...

But thinking about it, it was those silly times we spent together that deepened our friendship. Had it been a healthier relationship, his death probably wouldn’t have brought me this much loneliness.
If only he’d gotten me involved, I thought. If Shindo’d invited me, I’d gladly dive into a ravine with him, laughing.
Maybe he knew that, and that’s why he died without saying a word to me.

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The cicadas died off, the trees turned red; autumn came. It was the end of October. And I suddenly recalled a rather forgettable conversation I'd had with Shindo.

It was a clear July afternoon. We were in a humid room, drinking and rambling to one another.
There was a mountain of cigarette butts in the ashtray that looked like it'd collapse with a single touch, so I placed empty cans beside it, neatly-aligned like bowling pins.

Our ears were hurting from the buzzing of cicadas perched on the telephone pole near the window. Shindo grabbed one of the cans, went out on the veranda, and threw it at the cicadas.
It completely missed its mark and fell onto the road with a clatter. Shindo cursed. As he went back to pick up a second can, the cicadas flew off as if to ridicule him.

"Oh yeah," Shindo said, standing there with the can in hand. "Shouldn't you know if they accepted your application by now?"
"Wish you would've gotten curious *before* they told me anything," I implied.
"Rejected?"
"Yeah."
"That's a relief," Shindo sighed, having not gotten any job offers either. "Applied anywhere else since then?"
"Nope. I'm not doing anything. My job hunting's gone on summer vacation."
"Vacation? Sounds good. I think mine's taking one too."

There was a high-school baseball game on TV. The players, four or five years younger than us, were being showered in cheers. Bottom of the seventh inning, and still no points for either team.

“This is a weird question,” I began, “but when you were a kid, Shindo, what did you want to be?”
“High school teacher. Told you that a bunch of times.”
“Oh yeah, I guess you did.”
“Now, though? Me shooting to be a teacher seems as implausible as a one-armed guy shooting to be a pianist.”

Shindo spoke the truth; he definitely didn’t look like someone suited to be a teacher. Don’t ask me what kind of occupation he *would* be suited for, though.
I guess he was already a teacher in the sense that he teaches people how you don’t want to end up, but as of now, “bad example” isn’t a valid job position.

“There *could* be a one-armed pianist, though,” I supposed.
“Eh, maybe. So what did you wanna be?”
“I didn’t want to be anything.”
“Liar,” he accused, prodding my shoulder. “Grown-ups will make kids *think* they have dreams, at least.”
“It’s true, though.”

Cheers came from the TV. The game was finally getting somewhere. The ball hit the fence, and the outfielder was desperate to get it. The second base runner had already made it to third, and the

shortstop gave up on throwing to home plate.
“We have a point!”, a commentator exclaimed.

“Hey, weren’t you on the baseball team in middle school? Pretty well-known in the area for your pitching?”, Shindo asked. “Heard about it from a middle school friend. A southpaw by the name of Yugami, only a second-year, but he could throw one hell of a precise pitch...”
“Guess that’s me. Yeah, I was pretty good at controlling my pitches. But I quit the team fall of that year.”
“Got an injury or something?”
“No, it’s kind of a weird story... Summer of my second year, the day we won the semifinals at the prefecture prelims, I was basically a hero. I don’t mean to brag, but it was like I carried the team to victory all by myself in that game. It was really rare for our school’s team to make it that far, so the whole school was cheering us on. Everyone I came across praised me.”

“Can’t imagine that at all, lookin’ at you now,” Shindo said doubtfully.
“Yeah.” I smiled bitterly. I couldn’t blame him for that. Even I was incredulous every time I thought back on it.

“Despite not having many friends at school and hardly standing out, that day made me a hero. It felt incredible. Except... That night, when I lay down in bed and thought about it, I felt this intense shame.”
“Shame?”
“Yeah. I was ashamed of myself. I was like, what do I think I’m

getting so happy about?"
"There's nothin' wrong with that, though. Of course you'd be happy after that."
"I guess." He was right, there wasn't a single reason not to be elated then. I should've just embraced it. But something deep in my mind crawled up and denied it. My mood instantly sank, like a overfilled balloon popping.

"Anyway, as soon as that happened, the whole thing started to seem ridiculous to me. And I thought, I don't want to embarrass myself any more. So two days later, the day of the finals, I got on the early morning train and went to a movie theater, of all things. And I watched four movies in a row. I remember the air conditioning made me so cold, I was rubbing my arm the whole time."

Shindo laughed heartily. "Are you a moron or what?"
"A huge moron. But even if I could go back in time and have that chance again, I think I'd do the same thing. Naturally, the team ended up losing by a huge margin. The staff, the supervisor, my classmates, my teachers, my parents, they were all furious. They treated me like I'd murdered somebody. When they asked me why I didn't come to the finals, and I said I'd just gotten the date wrong, that only added fuel to the fire. On the first day of summer vacation, all these people dragged me away and beat me up. Broke my nose, so it's shaped a little different now."

"You reap what you sow," Shindo noted.
"No doubt," I agreed.

The game on TV had wrapped up. It ended with the last batter doing a clumsy grounder to second.
Both teams got together and shook hands, but the losing team - probably instructed to do so by their supervisor - put on fake, creepy smiles the whole time. Talk about abnormal.

“I’ve always been a kid who didn’t want anything,” I said. “Never felt like doing that, or wanting this. It’s hard for me to get heated up and easy for me to cool down, so I could never keep anything going. My wishes for Tanabata were always just blank strips. We didn’t do Christmas presents at my house, but I wasn’t dissatisfied with that. In fact, I sort of felt bad for other kids who had to decide what they wanted every year. When I got New Year’s money, I had my mom hold onto it, and had her use it to pay for the piano lessons I took. Oh, and I only took those piano lessons so I could spend less time at home.”

Shindo turned off the TV, plugged in the CD player, and pressed play. The CD was Neil Young’s “Tonight’s the Night,” one of his favorites.
Once the first track had finished, he remarked, “Sounds like you were never a “kid” at all. Gross, man.”

“But I felt like that was normal at the time,” I explained. “Grown-ups will scold selfish kids, but they won’t scold a kid who’s not selfish at all, so it took me a while to realize it was weird... Maybe that’s the same wall I’m up against now. Even job recruiters can tell, I bet. That I don’t really want to work, in fact, I don’t even want

money, and even being happy isn't a thing I'm too interested in..."

Shindo was silent for a while. Guess I said something stupid, huh.
As I was thinking of something else to say to change the subject, he spoke.

"But you enjoyed writing letters, didn't you?"
"...Letters? Yeah, there was a time I did that." I never for a moment forgot about it, but I spoke as if I'd only just remembered again.
Shindo was the only one who knew not only that I'd been penpals with Kiriko, but also that I'd told nothing but lies in my letters to her. I happened to let it slip at a beer festival last year, while drunk and annoyed by the sunlight.

"Yeah, I guess I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy that."
"What was the name of the girl you were talking with, again?"
"Kiriko Hizumi."
"Right, Kiriko Hizumi. The one you totally cut contact with. Poor girl, still bravely sending letters even after you decided to ignore her."

Shindo chewed off a piece of beef jerky and downed some beer. Then he continued.
"Hey, Mizuho. You oughta meet Kiriko Hizumi."
I snorted, thinking he was joking. But his eyes were the definition of serious, convinced he'd come up with the most brilliant idea of his life.
"Go meet Kiriko, huh," I sarcastically repeated. "And then apologize for what I did five years ago? Say "forgive this poor liar"?"

Shindo shook his head. “Not what I’m trying to say. It doesn’t matter if what you wrote is lies or not. ’Cause that, uh... “mingling of souls” you mentioned, it’s not just anyone you can pull something like that off with. You and this girl could be pretty damn compatible, so have some confidence. I mean, just look at your names, it’s like fate. Yugami and Hizumi, they both mean “distortion.””

“Either way, it’s way too late.”
“I wouldn’t say that. What I think, if it’s someone who really gets you, a five-year, ten-year blank isn’t a problem at all. You can pick things up again like it was only yesterday. I’m just saying, it couldn’t hurt to give it a try, if only to see if Kiriko Hizumi’s that kind of person for you. Could even help with your not-wanting-anything problem.”

I don’t remember how I replied to that. But I’m sure it was a vague answer that cut the conversation short.

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I’ll go meet Kiriko, I decided. I wanted to honor Shindo’s suggestion, and I was lonely after losing my best and only friend.
Most importantly, I was pushed forward by the harsh realization that the people you care about won’t live forever for you.

Working up all my courage, I went outside and drove to my parents’ house. I took out the rectangular cookie tin from the closet in my room, and sorted the letters from Kiriko within on the floor by date.

But as much as I looked for them, I couldn't find those last letters that I'd never opened. I wondered where I could've put them.

Taking in the nostalgic smell of my room, I reread the letters one at a time. There were one hundred and two spanning five years, and I went from the last letter backwards.
By the time I finished reading the very first letter she'd sent, the sun had set.

I bought envelopes and stationery, returned to my apartment, and wrote a letter. My hands could write her address from memory.
There was a lot I wanted to tell her, but feeling it would be best to say it in person, I made the letter brief.
"I'm sorry about breaking contact five years ago. I've been hiding things from you. If you're willing to forgive me, then come to ___ Park on October 26th. It's the children's park on the way to my elementary school. I'll be waiting there all day."
With only those few sentences, I put the letter in the mailbox.

I had no expectations. And I intended to keep it that way.

# Chapter 2: A Common Tragedy

Kiriko never showed up at the park.

Checking my watch to confirm that twenty-four hours had indeed gone by, I lifted myself up from the bench.
Waiting here any longer would be pointless. So I left behind the bench with peeling paint, the swings without seats, the rusted jungle gym - the playground that had so completely changed since a decade ago.

My body was chilled to the core. Even having an umbrella up, it was only natural after spending an entire day in this late October rain.
My mod coat was waterlogged and cold, my jeans clung to my legs, and my newly-bought shoes were covered in mud.
At least I'd taken the car, I thought. If I'd gone with my initial plan of taking buses and trains, I'd have to wait until morning for the train.

I quickly escaped into the safety of the car, threw off my wet coat, started the engine and turned on the heater. The ventilator spewed out moldy-smelling hot air, and twenty minutes later, the car was finally warm.
Right about as I stopped shivering, I started craving a drink. A good strong drink with lots of alcohol, perfect for drowning my sorrows.

I stopped by the late-night supermarket and bought a small bottle of whiskey and some mixed nuts.
As I waited in line at the register to pay, a woman in her late twenties with no makeup cut in front of me. Slightly afterward, a

man who appeared to be her boyfriend came in.
Both of them looked like they'd just gotten out of bed, kept their pajamas on, and threw on sandals, yet I smelled perfume that seemed recently-applied.
I thought about complaining at them for cutting in line, but nothing came out of my mouth. "Coward," I silently scolded myself.

Sitting in my parked car in the corner of the lot, I leisurely had my whiskey. The hot candy-colored liquid scorched down my throat, putting a gentle fog around my senses.
The crackling golden oldies on the radio comforted me, as did the sound of raindrops beating on the roof. The lights in the parking lot shimmered through the rain.

But the music always ends, the bottle empties, the lights go out. As I turned off the radio and shut my eyes, I was hit with intense loneliness.
I wanted to get back to my apartment and thoughtlessly sleep with my blanket pulled over my head, right now, and not a moment sooner.
The darkness, silence, and solitude which I generally preferred, at this particular moment, ate into me instead.

Though I was determined not to get my hopes up from the start, it seemed I had been more hopeful to have a reunion with Kiriko than I even realized. My intoxicated brain was being more honest about recognizing my true feelings than usual.
Yes, I'd been wounded. I was deeply disappointed that Kiriko hadn't shown up at the park.

She must not have needed me anymore.

I'd have been better off not making this invitation in the first place. There was no changing that both at 17 and at 22, I was a lying loser with countless shortcomings.
In fact, I should have just gone to meet her when she actually wanted us to meet in person. What a waste I'd made of that chance.

I'd intended to sleep until the alcohol was out of my system, but I changed my mind.
I drove out of the parking lot, foot hard against the accelerator, making my old, second-hand car shriek in pain.
I was driving drunk. I knew it was against the law, but the pouring rain numbed me. I felt like in a storm like this, you couldn't hold a few wrongful acts against someone.

The rain gradually let up. To keep away the drowsiness from the alcohol, I upped the speed. 60 kilometers per hour, 70, 80. I would crash into deep puddles with a great sound, then speed up again.
On rural roads, in this awful weather, at this time of night, surely there was no need to worry about other cars or pedestrians.

It was a long straightaway. Tall streetlamps made long chains along both sides.
I took a cigarette from my pocket, lit it with the cigarette lighter, and took three puffs before tossing it out the window.

That was when my drowsiness hit its peak.

I don’t think I was out for more than a second or two. But the moment I came back to my senses, it was too late. My car was veering into the opposite lane, and the headlights illuminated a figure mere meters ahead.

In a brief moment, I thought many things. Among them were lots of meaningless memories from my childhood that I’d long forgotten.
The watery-blue paper balloons my kindergarten teacher straight out of junior college made us, a crow I saw on the veranda when I had a cold and took the day off school, a gloomy stationery shop we stopped by on the way home from visiting my mother in the hospital, etcetera.
It was probably something like my life flashing before my eyes. I was searching through twenty-two years of memories trying to find some useful knowledge or experience to help avoid this impending crisis.

The brakes screeched shrilly. But it was unquestionably too little, too late. I gave up on it all and closed my eyes tight.
~~The next moment, a powerful *thump* rocked the car.~~

Except, there was no thump.
A few seconds passed that felt like an eternity. I stopped the car and looked around fearfully, but saw no one fallen to the road, at least not within range of the headlights.

What happened?

I turned on my hazard lights and got out, first going around to the front of the car. Not a scratch or dent. If I had run someone over, there would definitely be some trace of it.
I looked around again, under the car too, but there wasn't any corpse. My heart was beating like mad.
I stood there in the rain. The beeping telling me that my door was still open echoed through the darkness

"Did I make it in time?", I asked myself aloud.
Had I swerved out of the way just in time? Had they swiftly avoided me? And then, did they just run away?
Maybe it had all been an illusion, from my intoxication and fatigue.
At any rate, did it mean I had made it out of the situation without running someone over?

A voice came from behind me.
"You didn't."

I turned around and saw a girl. From her gray blazer and tartan-check skirt, she looked like a student on her way home.
She seemed more or less 17, so she was almost two heads shorter than me. And she had no umbrella, so she was soaked, her hair clinging to her face.
Odd as it may sound, I think I fell for that long-haired girl standing in the rain, lit by the headlights.
She was a beautiful girl. It was a kind of beauty that wasn't marred by rain and mud - rather, such things drew more attention to it.

Before I could ask what she meant by "You didn't," the girl pulled

off the school bag hanging from her shoulder, held it in both hands, and hurled it at my face.
The bag landed a direct hit on my nose, and a flash of light filled my vision. I lost balance and tumbled to the ground, landing face-up in a puddle. The water quickly seeped into my coat.

“You were too slow. *I died,”* the girl spat, straddling over me and shaking me by the collar. “What have you done to me? How could this happen?”
As I began to open my mouth, the girl’s hand flew out and slapped my cheek, then a second time, and a third. I felt the back of my nose plugging up with blood. But I had no right to complain about what she was doing.

*Because I’d killed her.*

Granted, my victim was quite heartily beating the stuffing out of me still, but no doubt, I’d run her over going over 80 kilometers an hour. At that speed? At that distance? No braking, no swerving could have prevented the inevitable.

The girl balled up her fist and struck me repeatedly in the face and chest. I felt little pain while being beaten up, but the impact of bone against bone unsettled me.
She seemed to get exhausted, coughed fiercely and tried to catch her breath, and finally stopped.
The rain continued to pour as always.

“Hey, can you explain what happened here?”, I asked. The inside of

my mouth had been cut, and it tasted like licking iron. “I ran you over and killed you. That seems pretty undeniable. So, why are you unhurt and moving around? Why isn’t there a scratch on the car?”

Rather than answer, the girl stood up and kicked me in the flank. Actually, maybe it would be better to say she stomped me with the weight of her whole body.
*That* was effective; a pain shot through me like my organs had been stabbed with a stake. I felt all the air leave my lungs.
For a while, I couldn’t breathe. If I’d had a little more in my stomach, I’d probably have vomited. Seeing me curl up feebly and hack in anguish, the girl seemed satisfied to an extent and stopped with the violence.

I stayed down on the ground, face-up toward the rain until the pain cleared. When I raised myself to stand up, the girl extended a hand to me. Unsure of her intent, I stared at it blankly.
“Do you want to lie down there forever? Stand up already,” she insisted. “I’ll have you take me home. You’d better at least do that for me, murderer.”
“...Right. Of course.” I took her hand.

---

The rain started pouring hard again. It made a sound like hundreds of birds pecking on the roof.
The girl sat in the passenger’s seat and threw her wet blazer onto the back seat, then fumbled to turn on the light.

“Are you listening? Take a look at this.” She thrust her palm in front of my face.
Shortly after doing so, a light-purple wound appeared on her pretty palm. It looked like a cut made with something sharp that had healed into a scar over the years. I couldn’t see it being something she suffered from the accident earlier.

I must have looked sufficiently dumbfounded, so she explained. “I got this cut five years ago. ...You figure out the rest. You more or less know the explanation now, don’t you?”
“No I don’t. Actually, I’m just more confused. What’s going on here?”
She sighed in annoyance. “In short, I can change events that happen to me so that they never happened.”

Never happened?
I tried to give her words some thought, but found I didn’t understand anything about it.
“Can you make it a little simpler for me? Is that a metaphor?”
“No. Just interpret it exactly the way it sounds. I can change events that happen to me so that they never happened.”

I scratched my neck. Interpreting it exactly as it sounded just made it impossible to understand.
“I can’t blame you if you don’t believe me. Even I haven’t figured out why I can do it yet.”
She slowly ran her index finger over the cut on her palm. “To repeat - I got this cut five years ago. But I nullified the fact that I was cut. And now, for the sake of this explanation, I put it back to normal.”

She “nullified” the fact it happened?
It was a story much too distanced from reality. I’d never heard of anyone who could undo events that happened to them. It was clearly beyond human ability.
But I found myself faced with a situation that couldn’t be explained any other way. Her being here proved it.
Logically, I should have run her over, yet she was spared it. And she made a wound she hadn’t had before suddenly appear out of nowhere.

It sounded like magic from a fairy tale, but I had to believe it until some other acceptable explanation presented itself.
For the time being, I accepted the theory. She was a wizard. She could make things that happened to her “not happen.”

“So you mean, you also undid the accident I caused?”
“That’s right. If you don’t believe that, I can show you another example...” She rolled up the sleeve of her blouse.
“No, I believe it,” I told her. “It’s pretty... pretty unreal, but I’m seeing it before my eyes. But if you undid the accident, why do I seem to remember running you over? Why didn’t I just keep driving along?”
Her shoulders sagged. “I don’t know. It’s not something I do entirely consciously. I want someone to tell me just as much.”

“And one more thing. You probably say it that way for convenience, but strictly speaking, you can’t really undo *everything*, right? Otherwise I can’t think of an explanation for your anger earlier.”

“...Yes, you’re right,” she confirmed, sounding discouraged. “My ability is only something temporary. After a fixed time, the thing that I undid will go back to happening again. So all I can do, in essence, is “postpone” events that I don’t want to happen.”

Postponing... That explained it. Her anger made perfect sense now. She hadn’t avoided death, she just stored it away, and would eventually have to accept it.
From the other things she said, I supposed she could at least postpone events for five years. She seemed to see through my thoughts and interrupted.

“Just so you know, I could only postpone the cut on my palm by five years because it was a light, non-threatening wound. How long it can be prolonged depends on the strength of my desire and the size of the event. A stronger desire extends the time, and a bigger event shortens it.”
“So then how long can you postpone tonight’s accident?”
“...Going off intuition, I’m guessing ten days at the most.”

Ten days.
Once that time had passed, she would die, and I would be a murderer.
It didn’t feel real to me. For one thing, the victim of my crime was here talking to me at this moment, and I couldn’t let go of the faint hope that this was all a bad dream.
I’d had tens, hundreds of dreams like this where my mistakes had caused irreparable harm to others, so I wondered if that could be all this was.

For the time being, I apologized.
“I’m sorry. I really don’t know how to make it up to you...”
“Fine by me. Apologizing won’t bring me back, nor will it absolve your crime,” she shot at me. “For now, just take me back home.”
“...Sure.”
“And please drive safely. I won’t stand for you running over someone else.”

I drove carefully, as she instructed. The sound of the engine, usually ignored, seemed unusually loud in my ears. The taste of blood in my mouth never leaving, I swallowed my spit repeatedly.

---

She told me she became aware of her strange power when she was eight.
On the way home from piano lessons, she found the corpse of a cat. It was a gray one she knew well, that wandered around the local area.
It was thought to have been someone’s pet, as it was unusually friendly and would come circle around your legs if you beckoned to it. It wouldn’t run away when pet, and wouldn’t hiss. It was something of a friend to the girl.

The cat died in a terrible way. The blood on the asphalt was blackened, but the blood that had seemingly splattered on the guardrail was bright red.
The girl wasn’t brave enough to pick it up and bury it; she looked

away from the corpse and hurried back home. As she did, she heard a music box, playing “My Wild Irish Rose.”
Since then, she started to hear that same song again and again. When her “postponement” succeeded, she would hear it start up in her head. And by the time the mental performance ended, whatever it was that hurt her would have been “undone.”

After doing her homework and eating her wrapped dinner, she thought, “I wonder if that cat was really the one I knew?”
Of course, subconsciously, she knew that there was no mistaking it. But her surface consciousness wouldn’t accept it.

The girl put on sandals and snuck out of the house. When she arrived at the place she’d seen the corpse in the day, she found no corpse, and not even a bloodstain.
Had someone already come and picked it up? Was someone unable to bear it, so they moved the corpse? But no, something seemed off. It was like there had been no corpse or blood to begin with.
She stood there befuddled. I couldn’t be in the wrong place, right?

A few days later, she saw the gray cat. So it was all just a misunderstanding, she told herself, relieved. The cat walked over as always when she beckoned.
As she reached to stroke the cat’s head, she felt a burning pain on the back of her hand. She quickly retracted it and found a scratch on it about the length of her pinky.
She felt betrayed.

About a week passed, and the cut didn’t heal - rather, it began to

swell red. She felt nauseous and had a high fever, having to call in sick to school.
Maybe that cat was diseased, she thought. She forgot the name, but maybe it had that sickness one in ten cats have, and she got infected when it scratched her.

The fever refused to recede. Her body felt heavy, and her joints and lymph nodes hurt badly.
*I wish that gray cat being run over and killed hadn't just been me misunderstanding.* It didn't take long for her to start thinking that. If only that cat hadn't been alive, I wouldn't have to go through this.

When she next woke up, her fever was completely gone. She didn't hurt or feel nauseous; she was the picture of health.
"I think my fever's gone," she informed her mother, who tilted her head and asked, "Did you have a fever?"

What are you talking about?, the girl thought. She'd been bedridden by it for days. Yesterday, and the day before that...
But as she went back through her memories, she noticed that separate memories existed alongside those days she had been bedridden.
In *those* memories, she had gone to school yesterday, and the day before, and every day without fail for the past month. And she could remember everything: the lessons she had, the books she read at lunch, and all her meals.

At once, she was filled with deep confusion. Yesterday, I slept in bed all day. Yesterday, I had math class, and Japanese class, and

arts and crafts, and PE, and social studies. Her memories contradicted one another.
Thinking to look at her hand, she saw the wound was gone - and she didn't feel as if it had healed. It had completely vanished from where it should have been. No, she thought, it was never there.
The cat that died *was* the cat I knew. That cat wouldn't scratch people.

The girl became convinced, without any reason, that she was responsible for temporarily keeping alive the cat that should have died.
Because I wished for it, because I desperately didn't want that gray cat to be dead, I temporarily "undid" the event of the cat being run over.
But when that cat scratched me and made me sick, I wished for it to be dead instead. So the first wish lost effect, and the accident went back to "happening," so I was never scratched.

This interpretation the girl made was exceedingly correct. To test her theory, she returned to where she found the cat's corpse the next day.
As predicted, the bloodstains were back; so the accident had happened. It was only temporarily made to not.

Thereafter, whenever bad things happened, the girl would make them not happen, one by one. Her life was absolutely full of things she wanted not to have happened. That's why she figured she was given this ability.
All of this was something she told me some time afterward.

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While we waited at a red light, the girl spoke, gazing out the passenger-side window.
“You know, it smells weird in here.”
“Smells?”
“I didn’t notice before because of the rain... But have you been drinking?”
“Oh. Yeah,” I carelessly answered.
“Drunk driving?”, she asked incredulously and defeatedly. “So, what? You know how many people die from it and you just think *you’ll* be fine?”

I had no reply. I certainly must have known the risks of drunk driving, but the dim idea I had of those risks was getting pulled over for it, or crashing into something and hurting myself.
When it came to things that resulted in people dying, I thought of bank robberies or bus hijackings, things that I felt had nothing to do with me.

“Turn left here,” the girl instructed.
We got onto a mountain road with no lights. I looked at the speedometer and saw I wasn’t even going 30 kilometers an hour.
As I was about to press hard on the accelerator, my leg stiffened. Though I found it odd, I still increased speed, and found my hands getting abnormally sweaty.

I noticed the lights of a car in the opposite lane. I let off the

accelerator. Even after the car had passed by, I kept letting the car slow down until it came to a total stop.
My heart was beating like mad again, just like after the accident. A cold sweat dripped down my sides.
I tried to get the car moving again, but my legs wouldn't move. That sensation I'd felt right before running the girl over was stuck in my brain.

"Could it be," the girl supposed, "that after running me over, you're afraid of driving?"
"I give. Yeah, it seems that way."
"Serves you right."

I challenged myself again and again, but could hardly make it a few meters before coming to a standstill again.
I pulled off to the side of the road and stopped the car. Once the windshield wipers stopped, the window soon became completely covered with water.

"Sorry, but we're taking a break here until I can drive properly again."
With that, I undid my seatbelt, reclined the seat all the way back, and closed my eyes.
A few minutes later, I heard the other seat recline, and the girl turning on her side. She wanted to sleep facing away from me, naturally.

As I lay still in the darkness, waves of regret came upon me. I've done something that can't be undone, I thought to myself again.

I regretted each and every thing. It was a mistake to drive so fast. It was a mistake to be driving drunk. In fact, it was a mistake to be drinking at a time like that. No, even going to meet Kiriko at all had been a mistake.
People like me *should* just be miserable and cooped up in their rooms. Then at least they won't bother anyone else.
I'd ruined this girl's life.

To take my mind off it, I asked her, "Hey, what was a student like you doing walking in that desolate place, anyway?"
"That's my business," she coldly spat. "Are you trying to say that even though it was an accident, I did something to deserve it?"
"No, I wasn't implying anything like that, I just..."
"Your lack of caution and bigheadedness took someone's life. You don't *get* to talk like that, murderer."

I sighed deeply, and focused on the sound of the rain outside. I realized as I turned on my side that my body was completely exhausted. And thanks to the remaining alcohol in me, my senses were going in and out.
I wished that when I woke up, everything would be back to normal.
As I dozed off, I heard the girl sobbing to herself.

---

I was in an arcade, late at night. It was a dream, of course.
The ceiling was yellowed with nicotine, the floor was covered in burn marks, the fluorescent lights flickered, and two of the three vending machines had notices with "OUT OF ORDER" crudely

written on them.
None of the old cabinets all lined up in a row were turned on, and everything was deathly silent.

“I ran over a girl,” I said. “I was going way faster than you’d need to, to kill someone. The brakes barely worked in the rain. I guess I’ve become a killer.”
“Aha. So, how do you feel now?”, Shindo asked with great interest, sitting on a stool with a torn cushion, smoking a cigarette, and leaning on the cabinet with his elbow.
His brusqueness was strikingly nostalgic. Shindo was just that kind of guy. What was good news for others was bad news for him, and vice versa.

“Whaddya think? I feel terrible. Just imagining what kind of punishment I’ll get for this makes me want to die.”
“Nothin’ to worry about. You’ve got no “life” to lose in the first place, right? You’re already living like you’re dead. Nothing to live for, no goals, no fun...”
“And that’s why I just want it to be over! ...I should’ve just followed after you, Shindo. I could’ve killed myself easy, after the death of my best friend.”
“Stop it, you’re grossing me out. You make it sound like a lovers’ suicide.”
“Guess it is.”

Our laughter filled the silent arcade. We put coins into a beaten-up old cabinet and went head-to-head in an ancient game. He won, 3 to 2. Considering our relative skill levels, I think I put up a good

fight.
Whatever you had him do, Shindo was always better than average. He was quick to grasp just about everything. But on the other hand, up to the last, he was never the best in anything.
I think maybe he was scared. Deathly afraid of a moment when he'd devote himself to something, then blank out and think "What was I doing?"
So he could never give all of himself to just one thing. I wished I could be like that.
And that must be why Shindo always liked things which were clearly pointless. Games from generations past, useless music, his unreasonably huge vacuum tube radio. I loved that sense of unproductiveness.

Shindo sat up from the stool and brought two canned coffees from the single working vending machine.
As he handed me one, he said, "Hey, Mizuho, I wanna ask something."
"What?"
"Was that accident really something that was totally avoidable?"

I didn't understand his question. "What do you mean?"
"What I mean is, well... Maybe you called this tragic situation you're in upon yourself, somehow."
"Hey, now, you trying to say I had that accident on purpose?"

Shindo didn't reply. With an intriguing smile, he tossed his cigarette, now mostly filter, into the empty coffee can and lit a new one. As if to say, "think about it some."

I pondered his words. But as much as I scoured my brain, I couldn't come to a conclusion worth calling a conclusion. If he was just pointing out my destructive tendencies, there was no need to ask it like that.
He was trying to get me to notice something.

With that dreamlike lack of consistency, I was no longer in an arcade. I stood at the entrance to an amusement park.
Behind the stands and ticket booths, a merry-go-round, and a revolving swing, I could see such attractions as a giant Ferris wheel, a pendulum ride, and a roller coaster.
There was noise from the attractions all around me, and shrill voices yelling. Large speakers around the park played infinitely cheery big band music, and I heard the sound of an old photoplayer among the attractions.

It didn't seem I had come there alone. Someone was there holding my left hand.
Even in my dreamy state, I found it odd. I'd never once gone to an amusement park with someone.

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I sensed a light beneath my eyelids. When I opened them, I found the rain had stopped, and the deep blue of night and the orange of morning were mixing near the horizon.
"Good morning, murderer," the girl chirped, having woken up before me. "Do you think you can drive now?"
Illuminated by the sunrise, her eyes showed traces of having been

cried out.
“Maybe,” I answered.

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My fear of driving seemed only temporary after all. My hands on the wheel and my feet on the accelerator had no problems. Even so, I drove carefully down the wet roads glimmering in the morning light at around 40 kilometers an hour.
There was something I wanted to tell the girl. But I didn’t know how to break the subject. I arrived at the destination while my early-morning brain was still thinking things over.

“That bus stop is fine,” she pointed. “Let me off here.”
I stopped the car, but also stopped the girl as she tried to open the passenger door and leave.
“Listen, is there anything I can do? I’ll hear out anything. Let me try and make up for my crime.”
She didn’t reply. She got onto the sidewalk and started walking away. I left the car and ran after her, grabbing her shoulder.

“I really know I’ve done something terrible. I want to make up for it.”
“Please, get out of my sight,” she insisted. “Right now.”
I hung on. “I’m not expecting your forgiveness. I just want to make you feel the tiniest bit better.”
“Why should I have to go along with your self-serving idea of scoring points with me? “Make you feel better?” *You* just want to feel better, don’t you?”

That was a bad way of putting it, I realized too late. Anyone would be insulted to hear that from the person who killed them.
I felt like anything more I said would make her angrier. I could only back off for now.
“Okay. You seem to want to be alone, so I’ll go poof for now.”
I took out a notebook and wrote down my phone number, tore out the page, and gave it to the girl.
“If there’s anything you want me to do, call that number and I’ll come running.”
“No thanks.”

She tore the page to pieces before me. The strips of paper were blown away, mingling with the yellow leaves that had fallen to the road after last night’s rainstorm.
I wrote my phone number in the notebook again and put it in the pocket of her bag. She tore that page apart too, throwing confetti to the wind.
But I refused to learn and kept writing my number down and giving it to the girl.

After eight tries, she finally gave in.
“All right, I get it. Now just leave. You being here just saps my energy.”
“Thank you. Whether it’s late or night or early in the morning, call me about the most trivial things if you want.”

Adjusting her uniform skirt, the girl walked off quickly as if running.
I, too, decided to return to my apartment for now.

I went back to the car, stopped at the first restaurant I saw for breakfast, and drove safely home.

Thinking about it, it had been a long time since I'd been out while the sun was.
Crimson cosmos grew on the roadside, blowing in the wind.
The blue sky under which the madder reds danced seemed much bluer than it was in my memory.

# Chapter 3: Scoring Points

I thought that people in situations like these couldn't get any sleep. But after a hot shower, a change of clothes, and lying down in bed, my eyelids quickly got heavy, and I slept like the dead for six hours.
When I woke up, I felt surprisingly not bad. In fact, that oppressiveness I'd felt upon waking up for the past few months was gone.
I sat up to check my phone and found no messages. The girl still didn't need me, I guess. I lay down again and stared at the ceiling.

Why did I feel so good despite having run someone over last night? A total turnaround from yesterday's heavy regrets, my mind was clearer than ever.
Thinking about it while listening to the drips of rainwater from the gutter, I came to a conclusion.

Perhaps I was freed from my fear of falling lower and lower. Amid my miserable existence, I had felt myself rotting away. So I was full of anxiety over how much I'd fall, how bad I'd get.
However, the accident last night dropped me straight to the bottom. Upon falling as low as I could go, there was a kind of extreme comfort in that darkness.
After all, I couldn't go any lower. Compared to the dread of a limitless fall, the pain of hitting the ground was much more concrete and bearable.
There was nothing more I could lose. I had no hopes to betray, so I could have no despair.
So I felt at ease. There's nothing more dependable than resignation.

I went out on the veranda to take a smoke. A few dozen crows were perched on the power lines some distance away, and some flew around the area cawing hoarsely.
By the time I'd reduced about a centimeter of the cigarette to ash, I heard a woman's voice from the neighboring veranda.
"Good evening, mister shut-in."

I looked to my left and saw a girl meekly waving at me. She wore glasses, had a bob cut, and was dressed in nightwear.
She was the girl who lived next door, an art student in college. I didn't remember her name. But not because I didn't care about her or anything. I'm just bad at remembering names, just as it always is with introverts of my sort.

"Good evening, miss shut-in," I replied. "You're up early today."
"Give me that," requested the art student. "The thing in your mouth."
"This?", I asked, pointing at the cigarette.
"Yeah. That."

I reached out and handed her the partly-smoked cigarette. As always, her veranda was packed with decorative plants, like a miniature forest.
She had a small stepladder laid on top of the left and right edges serving as a flower stand, and a red garden chair was situated in the center. The plants were very carefully tended to and looked vibrant and lively, unlike their owner.

“So you went out yesterday,” she observed, taking smoke into her lungs. “Not what I’ve come to expect from you.”
“Aren’t I great?”, I replied. “Oh yeah... I was just about to call for you. You get the newspaper every day, right?”
“Yeah, but I only ever read the front page. What about it?”
“I want to read this morning’s paper.”
“Hm. Okay then, come over,” the art student told me. “I was about to call for you too, for tonight’s walk.”

I went out into the hall and into her room. This made the second time she’d let me inside. The first time had been a request for some company to drink her sorrows away with, and I tell you, I’d never seen someone living in such a messy place in my life.
I mean, I wouldn’t call it dirty. It was orderly enough. The size of the room and how much she owned just didn’t agree. She must have been the type to never throw anything away - totally opposite from me, who only had basic furniture and the like.

The art student’s room wasn’t any cleaner this time. Indeed, there’d been even more things crammed into it.
Her living room served as her atelier, so there were huge shelves along the walls with art collections and photo albums galore, as well as a huge collection of records that tightly filled all available space.
On top of the shelves, cardboard boxes were piled to the ceiling, and I could only imagine the disaster a good-sized earthquake would cause.

One of the walls had a French movie poster and a calendar from three years ago. One of the corners had a corkboard slotted in, with

artistic photos thumb-tacked on haphazardly covering the entire surface.
One of the two tables had a massive computer on top, with worn-out pens and pencils scattered in front. The other table was clean and neat, with only a record player in a wooden cabinet.

Sitting in the veranda chair, I looked over every line of the morning paper in the light of the setting sun. As expected, there was nothing about the accident I caused.
The art student took a look at the paper from beside me. “Haven’t read the paper in a while... But I’m not really missing much, huh,” she thought aloud.

“Thank you,” I told her, handing it back.
“Don’t mention it. Find the article you were looking for?”
“No, I didn’t.”
“Huh, that’s too bad.”
“No, the opposite. I’m relieved it’s not there. Um, can you let me watch your TV, too?”
“You don’t even have a TV at your place?”, the art student asked, astonished. “I guess I hardly watch mine, so it’s honestly not something I need, but...”

She went fishing under her bed, pulled out the remote, and turned it on.
“When does the local news start, anyway?”
“Pretty soon, I think. Weird to hear a shut-in interested in the news. Getting curious about the outside world?”
“No, I killed someone,” I told her. “I just can’t help but wonder if it

made the news."

She blinked, still looking right at me. "Wait. What?"
"I ran a girl over last night. I was going fast enough to kill her, for sure."
"Umm... This isn't just some kind of joke, is it?"
"It isn't," I nodded. Since she was the same kind of person as me, I felt at ease telling her anything. "And when I ran her over, I was totally drunk on whiskey. I don't have even a shred of an excuse."

She looked at the newspaper in her hand. "If that's the truth, then it is weird that it didn't make the news. You think they haven't found the corpse yet?"
"Well, there were some circumstances, and I should be able to get away with it for nine days. In that time, I'm sure my crime will never be noticed. I'm convinced after reading the paper."
"Yeah, I don't get it." She crossed her arms. "Do you have the time to be talking to me? Shouldn't you be erasing evidence, running away somewhere, that kind of thing?"
"You're right, there are things I need to do. But I can't do them alone. I need to wait for a call."

"...Right. Well, I'm still having a lot of doubts, but what I'm getting is that you're a serious criminal."
"Yes, any way you slice it."

At once, the art student's expression brightened. She grabbed my shoulders and shook me, her face beaming more than simply "joyous" could describe.

“Listen, I’m like, extremely happy right now,” she said. “I feel so much better.”
“Schadenfreude?”, I asked through a bitter smile.
“Yeah. I’m happy to know you’re such a loser beyond all help.”

It would be inaccurate to call her inconsiderate, as the art student smiled wide because of her consideration of my woes. Which made me feel a little bit better.
A reaction like this was more comfortable to me than awkward sympathy and worry. And at any rate, she was getting positive feelings thanks to me.

“So you’ve graduated from shut-in to killer.”
“Isn’t that a step down?”
“It’s a step up in my book. ...Hey, let’s go walking tonight. We’ll waste that meager postponement of yours. Sound good? It’s so comforting having you around.”
“I’m honored.”

“Great. How about a toast?” She indicated a bottle of beer in front of the shelves. “Isn’t there lots you want to forget, want to not think about?”
“I’ll hold off on drinking. I want to be able to drive right away when that call comes.”
“I see. Well, it’ll be water for you then, mister killer. Because, uh, beer and water is all I’ve got.”

Watching her drop ice into her glass and pour the whiskey, I felt a pang of nostalgia. It was an odd sensation; I felt like we were in a

picture book or a painting.
“Sorry, can I have a glass of that after all?”
“That’s what I was planning to give you.” She quickly filled the other glass with whiskey.

“So then, cheers.”
“Cheers.”
The rims of our glasses touched and made a lonely clink.

“I’ve never had a drink with a killer before,” she remarked while squeezing lemon juice into her glass.
“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Be sure to savor it.”
“I will,” she grinned, slyly narrowing her eyes.

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My shut-in art student neighbor and I got acquainted some time after I became a shut-in myself.

One day, I was lying down in bed and listening to music. Playing it at a loud volume without regard for anyone else, there was soon a loud knock on the door.
Was it a door-to-door evangelist? A newspaper salesman? I decided to ignore it, but they kept knocking. Annoyed, I cranked the volume up higher, and then the door slammed open. I’d forgotten to lock it.
The bespectacled intruder had a somehow familiar face. I supposed she was my neighbor, come to complain about the noise.
I prepared myself for her insults, but she just went to the CD player by my bed, took out the CD, switched it for another, and went back

to her room without a word.

Her qualms weren't with the volume, but with my taste in music.
I pressed play without checking what she'd put in and was met with guitar pop as sweet as orange juice, which was a little disappointing. I'd be hoping she might have recommended me something really good, but alas.
So that was my first meeting with the art student. Though I didn't learn she was an art student until a while later.

She and I both hated to go outside, but did go onto our verandas frequently. The difference being that she went to water her plants and I went to smoke, but still, we found ourselves getting closer each time we saw each other.
There was nothing obstructing the view between us, so when I saw her, I bowed my head without too much familiarity. I'd greet her, and with a watchful eye on me, she'd return the greeting.

Then, one day toward the end of summer, she was out watering her plants, and I leaned on the left railing and spoke to her.
"That's pretty impressive, raising all those plants by yourself."
"Not really," she mumbled in a barely audible voice. "It's not hard."
"Can I ask a question?"
Still observing the plants, she replied, "Sure, but I might not answer."

"I don't mean to dig too deep, but have you not left your room at all in the past week?"
"...And what if I haven't?"

“Dunno. I guess I’d just be happy.”
“Why?”
“Because neither have I.”

I picked up a cigarette butt from the ground, lit it, and took a puff. The art student opened her eyes and turned to me.
“Huh, I see. So you know I haven’t left my room because you haven’t left yours either.”
“Right. It’s scary outside. Must be the summer.”
“What do you mean?”
“Walking around under the sun makes me feel so miserable that it takes two, three days to recover. No, maybe guilty, or pitiful...”

“Hmm,” the art student replied, pushing up the bridge of her glasses. “I haven’t seen your friend lately. What happened to him? The one who looks like a drug addict. He was coming by almost every day.”
She must have meant Shindo. True, on some days his eyes would look out of focus, and he constantly had these creepy vague smiles, and generally did come off as a drug addict, but it was amusing to hear her say it so bluntly.

I held back my smile. “You mean Shindo. Well, he died. Just two months ago.”
“He’s dead?”
“It was suicide, most likely. He fell off a cliff on his motorcycle.”
“...Huh. I’m sorry I brought it up,” she apologized in a hollow voice.
“Not a problem. It’s a happy story, you see. The guy’s dream has finally come true.”

“...I see. I guess there might be people like that,” she meekly supposed. “So then, you can’t leave home out of sorrow for your friend’s death?”
“I’d like to say it’s not that simple, but...” I scratched my forehead. “Maybe it really is just that. I don’t really know, though.”

“Poor thing,” she whimpered, like a 7-year-old sister consoling her 5-year-old brother. “Is that why you’ve gotten so thin in the past month, too?”
“Have I gotten that skinny?”
“Yeah. Not even exaggerating, you look totally different. Your hair’s so long, and your whiskers are really something, and you’re skinny as a pole, and your eyes are sullen.”

It seemed obvious, and I guess it was. Not leaving the apartment meant I hadn’t eaten nearly anything but snacks to go with my beer. Some days I didn’t even eat anything solid.
Looking at my legs, I noticed that thanks to my lack of walking anywhere, they were as thin as a bedridden patient’s. And having not spoken to anyone in so long, I didn’t realize all my drinking had made my voice so hoarse; it didn’t sound like my voice at all.

“You’re really pale, too. Like a vampire who hasn’t sucked any blood in a month.”
“I’ll check the mirror later,” I remarked while feeling around my eyes.
“You might not see anyone in it.”
“If I’m a vampire, yeah.”
“That was the idea,” she smiled, grateful for me playing along with

her joke.

“So anyway, what about you? Why won’t you leave your room?”
The art student put her watering can down at her feet and leaned on the right side of her veranda toward me.
“I’ll save that for later. For now, I just thought of something really good,” she told me with a friendly smile.
“That’s good,” I agreed.

That night, as part of her really good idea, we left the apartment dressed in the fanciest clothes we could dig up.
I wore a jacket and one-wash denim jeans. The art student wore a navy cocoon one piece with a necklace and mule shoes, also switching her glasses for contacts and neatly doing up her hair. Clearly inappropriate attire for wandering around at night.

Prior to this, there’d been occasions where I was forced to go out, such as for shopping or going to the bank. And every time I was dragged out like this, my dread for the outside worsened.
The art student reasoned that this happened because I was only ever going out reluctantly and passively, and started to hate going outside in general.

“First we need to actively go outside and teach ourselves that the outside is a fun place,” she said. “All maladjustment is a result of mistaken teaching, thus adjustment can be achieved by erasing and amending that teaching.”
“Who’d you rip that quote from?”
“I think Hans Eysenck said something like that. Pretty incredible

thought, isn't it?"

"Well, a clear-cut idea like that sticks better than being told nonsense about broken hearts or contact or whatever. But what's the reason for the fancy clothes? It's not like anyone will see them."
The art student grabbed the sleeve of her one-piece and adjusted it.
"We feel tense, don't we? That's pretty much the only reason, but I think it's something very important for us right now."

We walked aimlessly around town dressed like we were headed for a party.
Lately, the heat in the day had been intense, but the wind started blowing at night, making it feel cool and autumn-like. Fewer bugs swarmed around the streetlights, dead ones taking their place underneath.
Stepping around the bug corpses, the art student stood under a light. A huge moth flew about her head.

She tilted her head and asked me a question. "Am I pretty?"
Getting some fresh air again seemed to have her excited. She reminded me of a child on her birthday.
"You are," I answered. I honestly did think she was pretty. Faced with a picturesque sight like this, I could really understand that feeling of "beauty." So I told her she was pretty.
"Good." She gave a wide and innocent smile.
A half-dead brown cicada beat its wings against the asphalt.

Our destination that night was an empty train station in the area. The station, hidden amongst residences, connected out to all places

like a spider web.
Sitting down, I lit a cigarette and watched the art student walk unsteadily on the tracks. There was a big cat up on the fence by the tracks, perched there as if watching over us.

That was how we began having our night walks. Every Wednesday, we'd dress up and go out.
Gradually, we recovered to the point where we could go out alone as long as the sun was down. Her idea, strange as it had seemed, was surprisingly effective.

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I'd nodded off, and a notification on my phone woke me up.
I hurried to collect my thoughts. I remembered as far as drinking with the art student, having our usual walk, going home and taking a shower. Maybe I fell asleep immediately after.

It was 11 PM. I picked up my phone and listened. The call was from a public phone, but I had no doubt that it was the girl I'd run over.
"So you didn't tear up that last page," I said into the receiver.
There was silence for many seconds, a way of the girl showing her pride. She didn't want it to seem like she was depending on me.

"You called this number because you want me to do something, right?", I asked.
Finally, the girl spoke. "I'll give you a chance to score some points. ...Come to the bus stop from yesterday."
"Roger that," I affirmed. "I'll head there right away. Anything else?"

“I don’t have much time to explain. Just come here.”

I grabbed a motorcycle jacket and my wallet, and left without even locking the door.
There were about ten lights on the way, but they all turned green for me right as I approached. I arrived at the destination much sooner than anticipated.

At the same bus stop where my first day’s duty had concluded, I found the girl in her uniform alone, burying her face in a dark-red scarf and sipping on a can of milk tea as she watched the stars.
I decided to look up too, and saw the moon poking out from between the clouds. The clearly visible shape of its shadow reminded me less of the man in the moon, and more the blotted skin of an old man who’d spent too much time in the sun in his youth.

“Sorry to make you wait.”
I got out of the car and went around to the other side to open the passenger door. But the girl ignored me, instead sitting in the back seat, throwing her school bag off, and exasperatedly closing the door.

“Where should we go?”, I asked.
“To where you live.” The girl took off her blazer and tightened her necktie.
“Sure, that’s fine. But can I ask why?”
“It’s not a big deal. I attacked my father, so I can’t stay at home anymore.”

“Did you have a fight?”
“No, I just decided to hurt him. ...Look at this.”
The girl rolled up the sleeve of her blouse.
There were many black bruises on her thin arm. Even if they were just burns, I supposed they must have been at least a year old.
With eight of them neatly lined up along her arm, I suspected they had been made in an unnatural way.

I recalled how after the accident, the girl called off her “postponement” of the wound on her palm for the sake of explanation, then pulled up her sleeve and said “If you don’t believe that, I can show you another example.”
This couldn’t have been the same arm I saw then. So she must have still been postponing these burns at the time. And in the time between then and now, something had happened to call it off.

“These are marks my father made by pushing a cigarette into my arm,” she explained. “They’re on my back, too. Want to see?”
“No, that’s fine,” I said, waving my hand. “So... You attacked your father as payback for that, and ran away from home?”
“Yes. I tied up his arms and legs with bands and hit him about fifty times with a hammer.”
“A hammer?” I wasn’t sure if I’d heard her right.
“I have it here.”

The girl took a double-ended sledgehammer out of her bag. It was a small one, like you’d use to pound nails in elementary school arts and crafts. It seemed old; the head was rusted, and the handle was blackened.

Seeing how disturbed I was by this, she smiled proudly. Ironically, that was the first age-appropriate, honest smile she ever showed me.
I guess she'd dropped one of the numerous bags burdening her.

"Revenge is a great thing. It's so relieving. I wonder who should be next? Because I don't have anything to lose anymore. ...Oh, yes. Naturally, you'll be helping me too, mister murderer."
With that, she laid down across the back seats and swiftly fell asleep. She must have hit the limits of exhaustion. After getting revenge on her father, no doubt she just grabbed everything she could and ran away.
I slowed down and drove carefully so that I didn't wake her up.

She probably purposefully let the burns "happen" to justify her retribution, I realized.
By no longer averting her eyes from her father's violence toward her, and accepting those wounds and the cause of them, she also earned the right to take revenge.

I wonder who should be next?, she'd said. If she had such a decision to make, there had to be at least two others worth taking revenge on, maybe more.
She must have lived a truly harsh life, I thought.

Back at the apartment, I opened the door, then returned to the car to carry the girl to my room.
I took off her loafers and socks, laid her down on the bed, and pulled the covers over her. Then she restlessly reached up and

pulled the covers up to her mouth.
Afterward, I heard about two or three bouts of sniffling. She was crying.

This girl's really busy between smiling and crying all the time, I thought.
What was making her sad? Surely the shortness of the time she had left? Or did she regret hurting her father? Was she remembering an abusive past? A lot of possibilities came to mind.
Maybe she didn't even know the reason for her tears. There were likely a lot of emotions going on in her; feeling lonely when she should be happy, feeling happy when she should be sad.

I laid down on the sofa and absentmindedly stared at the ceiling, waiting for morning. What should I say to the girl when she wakes up? What should I do? I thought it over at length.

And so began the days of revenge.

# Chapter 4: Coward Murderer

The girl was awoken by the smell of coffee. Seeing the thick slices of honey toast, the bisected soft-boiled egg, and the green salad spread out on the table, she sat down drowsily and slowly ate it all. She didn't look at me whatsoever while doing so.

"What are you going to do now?", I asked.
She indicated the wound on her palm. "I think I'll get payback for this next."
"Sounds like it wasn't your father who gave you that one, then."
"That's right. He was generally careful in his use of violence. He rarely left marks anywhere that couldn't be covered up."
"Other than him, about how many other people do you want revenge on, would you say?"
"I've narrowed it down to five. Five people who have all left permanent scars on me."

So then there were five more wounds she was still postponing? Actually, there could be more than one per person. *At least* five more wounds was how I should think of it.
This led me to a realization. "Might I be one of your five targets of revenge?"
"Obviously," she replied aloofly. "Once I've enacted revenge on the other four, I'll subject you to a suitable fate too."
"...Well, works for me." Even so, I scratched my face.

"But don't worry. No matter what I do to you, when the postponement of the accident - that is, the postponement of my

death - wears off, everything that I've caused after my death will have never happened."
"I don't know if I quite understand that part," I responded, voicing a concern I'd had for a while. "Does that mean you hitting your father with a hammer, once the postponement of my accident wears off, will be undone?"
"Of course. Because before I could enact any revenge, you ran me over and I died."

That was when she told me the story about her first postponement, with the gray cat.
Finding the corpse of a cat she'd adored, going to see it again that night, seeing the corpse and blood gone, being scratched by the cat and getting a fever, then suddenly being cured of the scratch and fever, and gaining contradictory memories.
"So comparing it to the revenge on your father, you'd be the cat, and the hammer would be its claws."
"Yes, I think you have the idea."

So then, no matter how much harm the girl inflicted on others from here on out, all of it would be gone once the effects of her postponement ended.
"Is there a point to a revenge like that?", I wondered aloud, airing some honest doubts. "Absolutely anything you do will just be undone in the end. And "the end" being in ten... uh, nine days."
"Imagine you're dreaming, and realize that you're in a dream," the girl explained. "Would you think, "Nothing I do will have an effect on reality, so why bother?", or would you think "Nothing I do will have an effect on reality, so I'll do whatever I want"?"

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never had any dreams like that,” I shrugged. “I’m just thinking about what’s best for you. Bringing pain to the people who made you unhappy won’t bring back your lost happiness. I’m not trying to trample on your anger and resentment, but really, revenge is just meaningless.”
“*Thinking about what’s best for me?*”, the girl repeated, emphasizing each word. “Well then, if not revenge, what do *you* think would be *best* for me?”

“Well, there’s gotta be other stuff to do with this valuable time. Go around meeting your friends and people who helped you out, confess to people you like, or maybe used to like...”
“There isn’t,” she interrupted sharply. “There was no one kind to me, helpful to me, no boys I like or used to like, no one. What you just said couldn’t possibly be any more ironic to me.”

Are you sure you’re not just blinded by your anger? Just think about it, I’m sure you’ll remember someone who was nice...
I wanted to say something like that, but I couldn’t deny the possibility that what she was saying was 100% true, so I swallowed my words.
“Sorry,” I apologized. “I wasn’t thinking.”
“Yes, you should be more careful about that.”

“...So, who’s your next target?”
“My sister.”
First her father, then her sister. Would her mother be next?
“Sounds like you didn’t live in a very pleasant household.”

“Quit while you’re ahead,” the girl replied.

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Until the moment I put my hand on the doorknob, I’d been convinced I was completely cured of my illness. But as I put on my boots and prepared to go out, I felt all the energy leave my body, and I froze up.
If someone who didn’t know the situation were to pass by, they might think the doorknob had an electric current running through it.

I stood in place. My pulse quickened, and my chest tightened and hurt. In particular, the pit of my stomach and my arms and legs were numb and completely lacked strength.
I tried just waiting there for a while, but things showed no sign of returning to normal. These were the symptoms. I’d thought my shock from the car accident had quickly cured it, but I still hadn’t conquered my fear for the outside.

The girl noticed me stopping like I’d run out of battery and furrowed her brow. “What is this, a joke?”
I guess it would’ve looked like I was messing around to her. Gradually, nausea welled up in me like my stomach was being filled with rocks. A cold sweat ran down me.

“Sorry, can you give me some more time?”
“Don’t tell me, you’re feeling ill?”
“No, I’m not good with going out. I’ve been living a life of only going

out in the dead of night for nearly six months."
"But two days ago, weren't you way out there?"
"Yeah. And maybe that's the reason I'm scared."

"First that thing after the accident, now this? How horribly weak-minded *are* you?", the girl remarked in disbelief. "Just cure yourself of that quickly, whatever it takes. If it's been twenty minutes and you're still hopeless, I'm going without you. Nothing's stopping me from carrying out the plan alone."
"I understand. I'll cure it."

I collapsed face-up on the bed. My quickened pulse and the numbness hadn't gone away.
Lying still, I noticed the sheets smelled faintly different, likely because the girl had slept here. I felt like my territory had been invaded.

Wanting to be alone even if it was only by way of a single wall, I hid away in the dim bathroom, lying my face on the toilet seat and covering it with both hands.
I took a big breath of the aromatic air, held it for a few seconds, breathed out, and repeated. Doing this very slightly eased me. But it was going to take quite some time to recover enough to go outside.

I left the bathroom and pulled some flip-up sunglasses out of a closet drawer. Shindo had bought them as a joke and left them with me. Anyone who wore them instantly looked like a foolish hippie.
I wiped off the lenses and put them on, then stood in front of the mirror. I looked even dumber than I could've imagined. I felt my

shoulders ease up.

“What are those awful glasses?”, the girl asked. “They couldn’t fit you any worse.”
“That’s what I like about them,” I laughed. With these sunglasses, I could laugh naturally. I still felt nauseous, but I was sure it’d clear up eventually. “Sorry about the holdup. Let’s go.”

I swung open the door with excessive force and went down the stairs. Getting in my forever cigarette-smelling car, I turned the key. The girl gave me a map on which she’d written a route and detailed comments in red pen.
“With all this preparation, I guess you’ve been planning this revenge for quite a while.”
She continued to stare at the map. “I lived thinking about nothing else.”

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The roads were congested in the morning. They were flooded with cars in both directions, and school commuters coming out of the station filled the sidewalks. Everyone carried umbrellas of all colors in preparation for rain.
When the car was stopped at the red light, some of the students walking across the crosswalk glanced at us, and I felt uncomfortable.
How must we have looked to them? I hoped that maybe I looked like someone on his way to college, taking his sister to high school on the way. The girl slid low into her seat to avoid being seen.

Turning toward the driver-side window, I saw a small flower shop surrounded by colorful flowers, and with four jack-o'-lanterns carved from pumpkins out in front.
All of the pumpkins had bright flowers blooming out of the hole on top, so they served as stylish flower pots.
I recalled now, of all times, that Halloween was at the end of October. It was nearly time for the local high school's culture festival, too. An exhilarating season for many, to be sure.

"I just had a thought," I said. "Can you be certain your sister is home? I find it unlikely your father wouldn't have notified her about the beating you gave him. And if she's aware you have a grudge against her, she might have fled elsewhere."
The girl seemed annoyed. "I don't think she's been contacted. That man's disowned her. Even if he wanted to contact her, I doubt he even knows her phone number."

"I see," I nodded. "How far is it to our destination?"
"About three hours."
This was going to be a long drive. All the radio stations were boring, and none of the CDs in the glovebox were something that struck me as suiting the tastes of a high school girl.

"...I know I can't be the only one surprised by the dip in temperature lately," a radio personality said. "What's the deal with the cold this year? This morning I saw someone wearing a winter coat, and I gotta say, it's just the climate for it. I'm no good with the cold, you know, so not only do I wear a scarf and gloves, I simply

have to double up the layers. Can you even believe it? But surprisingly enough...”

While we were stuck in traffic, I asked the girl if I could smoke.
“Fine, but give me one too,” she said.
I had no reason to refuse. Trying to preach to the person I’d killed about her health would be a laugh.
“Make sure no one outside sees,” I warned, then took a cigarette out of the pack and handed it to her after rubbing the leaf end.

Watching a girl in a high school uniform smoke a cigarette inside a car was unnatural to the extreme. With zero familiarity in her movement, she lit it using the cigarette lighter, took in some smoke, and coughed violently.
“You can just take in about a teaspoon of smoke,” I suggested. “That might have a better taste at first.”
She switched to my suggested method, but still choked after taking in the smoke.
I considered telling her she might not be made for smoking, but watching her stubbornly try again and again, I decided to let her do as she pleased.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” I prefaced, “but what did you sister do to you?”
“I don’t want to answer.”
“Okay.”

Putting the cigarette butt in the ashtray, she said “It’s not something I can explain briefly. At any rate, she’s someone who

drove me to a point from which I could never recover. Just remember that for now."
"What do you mean you could never recover?"
"There are hopeless faults in my personality. You know that, right?"
"I don't. You seem pretty normal to me."
"Already trying to score points with me? Flattery won't get you anywhere."
"That wasn't the idea." So I claimed, though I'd hoped those words would cheer her up.

"You said you'd consider me normal? Then let me show you proof to the contrary."
She reached into her school bag and took out a teddy bear. It wore a red military uniform and a black cap. It looked like a nice, soft toy.

"Despite my age, I still can't part with this. If I don't touch it from time to time, I'm overcome with anxiety. ...Am I making you shiver yet?", she spat out. She seemed to be considerably troubled by the fact.
"Like Linus and his blanket? It happens all the time, nothing to be embarrassed about," I interjected. "I used to know a guy a long time ago who named a doll and talked to it all the time. Really creepy. Compared to that, just having to touch it..."
"Oh, I'm *sorry* for creeping you out." She glared at me and put the bear away.

Should've kept quiet, I realized too late. I'd only ridiculed her in the most effective way possible. But really, who could have imagined a girl with such a cold glare naming a teddy bear and talking to it...

An awkward silence prevailed.

“...On that note, the theme for today’s write-ins is “moments that make me glad I’m alive!”,” the radio host said. “Our first letter is from a miss Mother of Two. “My daughters of six and eight get along so well that even I’m astonished. But on Mother’s Day this year, they prepared a surprise present...””

The girl reached out to turn down the volume on the car radio before I could.
It was a subject too dizzying for us right now.

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We escaped the traffic, spent two hours speeding down a stunningly autumn-colored road over a mountain pass, and arrived at the town where the girl’s older sister lived.
After getting a light meal at a hamburger shop and driving a few more minutes, we arrived at her house.

It was a very tidy house. Behind brick fencing, there was a well-kept garden with roses from all seasons, and in the corner of it was a swing with a roof on top of stone pavement.
The outside walls were a blue that seemed to melt into the sky, and the three windows on the second floor were white with round tops.
Such a happy-looking house. This is where the girl’s newlywed sister lived, she told me.
Nothing like my parents’ house, I thought.

Not to say that the house I used to live in didn't have any money put into it, but its outer appearance demonstrated the mental ruin of the owners.
The walls were covered in vines, and beneath them were scattered things that had long ago become unusable: a tricycle, rollerskates, a stroller, steel drums.
The front yard was big, but infested with so many weeds as to suggest the house was vacant, becoming a subpar place for stray cats to gather.

Maybe for a brief time after I was born, it was a happy enough house for me. Either way, by the time I gained self-awareness, my parents had come to consider the house not worth it.
Even though I was an only child, they considered me a heavy burden. Why did these people decide to start a family at all?, I always wondered.
When my mother left, it was relieving. It was the more natural way for things to be.

"Nice house," I said.
"You stand by outside the gate. I'd say there's an 80, 90% chance I won't need your help. Just be prepared to drive off right away."

The girl took off her jacket and left it with me, went under the arch to the front door, and rang the bell hanging on the wall. The clear metallic sound rang out.
The wooden door opened slowly. From behind it came a woman around the age of 25.
I observed her from behind a tree. She wore a dark green knit

pullover with gray parents. She wore her hair dyed chocolate-colored in a single-curl perm.
Her eyes looked wise, and her movements opening the door were graceful.

So she's the girl's sister, I pondered. They had some facial similarities, with their somewhat-colorless eyes and thin lips.
But I felt like their ages were too far apart for sisters, and I couldn't imagine her being someone who would slash the girl's palm with a knife.

I couldn't hear their conversation, but it didn't seem to be turning into an argument. I leaned back on the gate and dug around in my pocket for a cigarette, but I'd left them in the car.
I wondered, though, in what way did the girl intend to get revenge? Right before arriving, I'd taken a look in her bag and was certain she hadn't hidden away any dangerous weapons.
She'd attacked her father with a hammer, so would she do the same to her sister? Or did she have some other weapon prepared?

I never got to think about it, though. My questions were quickly answered.
Almost exactly when I finished and looked toward the front door again, I saw the girl fall on top of her sister.
The sister quickly tried to catch her, but couldn't hold her, and they fell over together. So it appeared.
Yet while the girl got back up, her sister showed no sign of getting up again. And she didn't ever get up.

I ran over to the girl, and the scene made me doubt my eyes.
Large dressmaking scissors had been stabbed into her sister's chest. One blade of the open scissors had been pushed all the way into her.
She'd done a very good job of it. There wasn't even a scream.
Blood filled the entryway, flowing through the gaps in the floor.
She'd achieved her objective with astonishing speed.

That stunned silence reminded me of an incident of my own.
When I was in fourth grade, and we had 30 more minutes left in PE, the teacher said we'd spend the remaining time playing dodgeball, and the children rejoiced.
This had become a semi-common event. I meandered over to the corner of the gym and mixed in with the other students watching the match.

Once about half of each team had been hit by the ball, some of the people who were out started getting bored. Ignoring the outcome of the game, they started playing around in their own ways.
One person did a clean frontflip on a part of the floor without a mat, and not to be bested, five or six other boys attempted to do the same.
This became more interesting to watch than the dodgeball, so my eyes followed the boys hopping and flipping around.

One boy flubbed his landing and hit his head on the floor. It was loud enough that I could hear it from a few meters away.
Everyone stopped moving. The one who hit his head didn't get up for a while.

After about ten seconds, he held his head and started to wail in pain - but he was only making a lot of noise to distract from his embarrassment, as it didn't seem to be that serious.
Those surrounding him, too, to do away with the brief worry that crossed their minds, pointed at laughed at the fallen boy, hitting and kicking him.

I was the first to notice a boy who wasn't part of that circle, and was lying down in a strange position. Everyone's attention was on the one who hit his head, so no one had had seen the moment when a boy with particularly slow reflexes broke his neck.
One by one, people became eerily aware of the boy not moving a muscle and stopped to look at him. Finally, the PE teacher noticed something was wrong and ran over.
Speaking so calmly as to seem too calm, the teacher told the students not to touch him, not to move him at all, and sped out into the hall.
Someone remarked "Of course the *teachers* get to run in the halls," but no one responded.

That boy never came back to school. We were told he'd damaged his spinal cord, but as fourth-graders, we could only think "I guess he hit his Achilles heel or something."
But our teacher, to emphasize the severity of the matter, explained that "he'll be wheelchair-bound his whole life" (a softened explanation, now that I think about it - he was already fully paralyzed and hooked up to a ventilator), and some of the girls started crying.
That's so sad. We should have been paying attention. Others

dutifully began to cry as well, and people suggested “Let’s go visit him,” “Let’s make him a thousand paper cranes.” The classroom was distressed, full of goodwill and selflessness.

The next month, the teacher told us in homeroom that he’d died.
That wounded boy uncomfortably lying on the floor of the gymnasium and the woman collapsed in front of us now overlapped in my mind.
At times, life can be lost so easily, as if swept away in the wind.

The girl put her fingers in the scissor handles, took a breath, and further opened the wound. She had clearly intended to kill. With an animalistic groan, the fallen body trembled and convulsed.
Upon cutting what I suppose was the stomach aorta, a spray of blood flew up, reaching to my feet two meters away.
The girl turned around, and her white blouse was soaked red with blood.

“...You didn’t say you’d go that far,” I said at last. I meant to sound unaffected, but my voice weakly trembled.
“I didn’t. But I don’t recall saying I wasn’t going to kill her.”
Wiping some blood off her cheek, she sat down on the floor.

I took off my sunglasses and looked down at the girl’s sister. Her face was so contorted in anguish as to look nothing it did before.
A flute-like sound came from her throat, and she coughed up blood.
It was now impossible to tell her pullover’s original color.
A putrid smell distinct from the mere smell of blood lingered; like compacted garbage, or a bathtub full of vomit. Whatever it was, it

was a powerful smell of death that I'd never forget after just one sniff.

I trembled violently, and tried to breathe calmly to keep myself from throwing up.
My vision widened, and I saw how the entryway had become a sea of blood. If it were a scene in a TV show, it would be enough blood to demand an extremely exaggerated reaction.
People must be sacks of nothing but blood, I figured, for there to be this much. I knew it was only making me feel worse, but my eyes couldn't look away from the torn stomach.
The blood was blacker than I thought blood was, though what had spilled out was an unmistakable bright color. A color remarkably close to a geranium poking out from a vase on top of a shoebox.

It brought to mind the poor roadkill I'd always see while driving down the road in the morning.
Whether they looked beautiful or terrible, were an animal or a human, they were all the same once you tore away a layer of skin.

Yeah, I thought with surprising calm. This is what death is. What I'd done to the girl was fundamentally no different from the tragedy I saw before me now.
Though it had yet to feel or even become real because of her postponement, I had turned the girl into a lifeless lump of flesh. Maybe her corpse would be even more tragic than this one.

After taking a step back to keep the blood off my shoes, I spoke.
"Listen, I'm going along with this to make up for my crime of

running you over. ...But helping you kill people totally undermines that. I don't want to be washing blood with blood."
"You don't have to go along with it if you don't want to. I don't recall forcing you into anything," the girl noted. "And once the length of my postponement ends, my actions will all go to nothing. As much as I struggle, I can only give people a *temporary* death. So whatever I do, isn't it fine in the end?"

So it was. This girl was already dead. No matter what she did after October 27th, the day of the accident, she would come to no longer exist during that time.
A girl who doesn't exist can't kill anyone. She could kill hundreds of people after October 27th, because once the postponement came to an end, it wouldn't count.
Like a player who was still on the court after being disqualified. They could rack up points, but by the end of the game, they'd just lose without regard for any of it.

Thus, like the girl said, she felt she could do whatever she wanted. By the end, it would amount to nothing but harmless self-satisfaction. No significant difference from being a killer purely in your imagination.
So then, wouldn't it be all right to have one chance to do anything you please before death? No, but even if it is only temporary, you're stabbing people, making them bleed and suffer. A killer is a killer. Those acts can never be forgiven, can they?

This wasn't the time to be mulling over it endlessly, though. Our top priority was to get away from the corpse as soon as possible; such a

discussion had no place here.
“Let’s get away from here for now. It’ll be bad if someone sees that blood on you.”

The girl nodded. I took off my jacket and put it on her shoulders. Zipping up the stand-up collar nylon jacket, you couldn’t tell she was bloodstained underneath from a distance.
It was a nice pricey jacket, but I didn’t need to worry, as everything would go back to normal once the postponement ended.

I looked around at the gate to confirm there was no one around and signaled to the girl.
But she was still just sitting there on the floor, unmoving.

“Come on, what’s keeping you? Hurry up.” I hurried back to her and grabbed her hand to pull her up.
But she collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

“I see. So this is it’s like for your legs to give out,” she muttered as if observing a stranger. “I guess I can’t laugh at you for this anymore. Pathetic...”
The girl sat up. With no energy in her legs, she crawled along the ground with her arms. She looked like a mermaid struggling to come ashore.
Though she maintained composure, it seemed she was in quite a panic.

“Not gonna be able to stand up anytime soon?”
“No. ...I guess it was a good thing I brought you along after all. Now

carry me back to the car."
She thrust both arms at me with haughtiness entirely distanced from the shameful plight she was in. But her hands trembled like a child thrown out into the freezing snow.

I delicately lifted her up. She was heavier than she looked, but light enough that I could run with her on my back if need be. She was covered in a cold sweat.
Reconfirming that there was no one around, I took her to the passenger's seat.

Carefully observing the speed limit, I chose to drive on roads with as few people as possible. My hands were sweaty on the wheel.
Noticing how regularly I was checking the back mirror, the girl told me "You don't need to worry about it. Even if we get arrested for what happened back there, I believe I'll be able to undo it. I can put off any bad things that way."
I remained silent, not even acknowledging her statement.

"Is there something you want to say?", the girl asked.
"...Did you really need to kill her?", I inquired, forgetting about getting in her good books. "I know you said your sister did something terrible to you. But was she evil enough to kill? You couldn't just give her the same kind of wound on her palm? What did she do? I just want a good explanation."

"Let me ask you this. Would you permit murder if there were a suitable reason?", she pressed. "For instance, suppose that in trying to stop a fight between my mother and sister, I was cut with a knife,

rendering me unable to play piano, a thing I lived for. Or that the people my sister brought home every week forced me to drink strong alcohol, and whenever I puked it up, they used a taser on me. Or that my drunk father singed my hair with lit cigarettes, telling me I was a waste of space who should kill herself already. Or that at school, I was pushed around and made to drink dirty water, was strangled for fun, had my hair and clothes cut up in the name of “dissection,” was pushed into a freezing pool in winter with my legs tied up... If I told you that were the situation, would you have at least the slightest approval for revenge?”

If she had told me this at any other time, it might have been hard to believe. I might have taken it as an empty lie, or at least an extreme exaggeration.
But having not long ago seen her murder her sister, I could easily accept it as truth.

“...I take it back. I’m sorry. I guess I brought back bad memories,” I apologized.
“I didn’t say I was actually talking about myself.”
“Right. Strictly hypothetical.”

“I’m not taking revenge out of a desire to punish them. The fear they instilled in me could only go away if they vanished from the world entirely. It’s like a curse. I’ll never have a peaceful sleep as long as it’s there, and I can’t deeply enjoy anything. I’m getting revenge to conquer my fear. At least once before I die, I just want to sleep soundly in a world where they’re gone.”

“I think I get it,” I nodded. “By the way, did you kill your father too?”
“I wonder.” She shook her head, and as if to clear her mind, she took a cigarette from the pack on the dashboard, lit it, and coughed.

She said she’d used a hammer when taking revenge on her father. Depending on where you hit them, you could easily kill a person with that.
I couldn’t remember if it was the back of the head or the hollow in the neck, but if you hit around that area, even a young woman could easily murder a grown man, I’d heard.

“Say, are your legs better now?”
“...I think walking will still be hard,” she said with a puff of smoke, knitting her brows. “The plan was to go straight to my next target of revenge, but I’m pretty hopeless right now. It’s inconvenient, but let’s go back to the apartment.”

I had a sudden realization. “Can you not postpone something as minor as that?”
The girl closed her eyes to carefully pick her words. “If this were a significant injury or illness, I could do that. But it’s extremely hard to postpone something that will just fix itself. My desire is too weak in that case. My soul needs to be screaming “I can’t bear for this to happen.””
I accepted that explanation. A scream of the soul, huh.

It took a while to notice the smell of blood filling the interior of the

car. The blood that had sprayed onto the girl.
I opened the window to air it out, but the smell like rusty guitar strings boiled with rotten fish permeated the car and wouldn't leave.
She had torn open her sister's stomach. Maybe it wasn't just the smell of blood, but also a mix of fat and spinal fluid and digestive juices.
A smell of death, at any rate.

"It's cold," the girl said.
I gave up on airing out the smell, closed the windows, and turned on the heater.

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For a night on which I'd witnessed a murder up close, the stars were entirely too pretty.
Luckily, we made it back to the apartment without anyone stopping us. Hurrying up the dusty staircase, I tried to open the door to my room, but had a hard time getting the key to fit. Right on cue, I heard someone coming upstairs.
Looking down at the key, I realized I was trying to jam my car key into the lock. I clicked my tongue, switched the keys to unlock the door, and pushed the girl inside.

The one coming up the stairs was my neighbor, the art student. When she saw me, she weakly raised her hand in greeting.
"Went out on your own? That's unusual," I casually remarked.
"Who was that girl?", she asked.

Even if a lie could have gotten me out of the situation, it was a case where that would only make things worse later. Answering honestly was the right choice here.

“A girl whose name I don’t know.” After saying that, it occurred to me that this also described the girl in front of me. Well, I know I’d heard it once or twice, but it just completely slipped my mind.
I’d always been terrible at remembering names. Since I rarely had the chance to use them.

“Hmph,” the art student grunted scornfully. “I see. So mister shut-in brought a minor to his room?”
“You’ve got me. Um, how should I explain this...”
“Thirsting for the blood of young girls?”, she guessed with a small smile.
“Just... listen to my explanation.”
“Go ahead.”

“It’s kind of complicated. She needs help right now, and I’m the only one she can rely on.”
After a few seconds of silence, she spoke quietly. “Could this possibly be related to the “accident”?”
“Yes. Helping her will make up for things. ...Maybe.”
“Huh,” she nodded. She was generally an understanding sort. “Then I won’t interfere any more. But tell me if you have any trouble. I doubt I can provide much help, though.”
“Thank you.”

“By the way, what’s with that stain?”

The art student was looking down at my feet. There was about a four-centimeter patch of dark red on the knee of my faded jeans. I hadn't noticed it until she pointed it out.
"What kind of stain is that? When did you get it?"
My surprise was evident, but I tried to pretend I had no idea how it got there. Even so, I knew my reaction probably told the whole story.
"Well, whatever stain it is, you should wash it off quickly. See you."
With that, the art student returned to her room.

I stroked my chest in relief and opened the door to my own room. The lights were already on.
The girl called from the laundry room. "Where do you keep the detergent?"
She was washing her blood-stained blouse, it seemed; I heard the basin filling with water.
"It should be by your feet," I said just loud enough for her to hear.
"Do you have a change of clothes?"
"No. Lend me something."
"Just take anything that's dried. Which should be almost everything."
I heard the sound of the washing machine door, then the shower door opening.

While she was taking a shower, I lay down on the sofa thinking back on what had happened just hours ago.
The moment the girl stabbed her sister with scissors, the weak coughing of the woman stabbed in the gut, the blouse stained by bloodspray, the smell from her internal organs, the pool of dark red

blood spreading across the floor, and the eerily quiet night.
It was all burned into the back of my mind. “Sent chills down my spine” wasn’t quite right; maybe that was appropriate, maybe not. Either way, my mind was shaken to the core witnessing, for the first time in my life, a stranger’s personal affairs.

The strange thing was, it wasn’t necessarily an unpleasant sensation. I respected Peckinpah and Tarantino and Takeshi Kitano, and I thought if I were really faced with a bloody scene like in one of their films, I’d get nauseous and faint.
But what was the reality? I wasn’t really feeling much uneasiness, fear, or self-blame; instead, I felt the same kind of catharsis I’d get from watching a carnivore eat its prey, or a massive disaster scene.
I recognized that it was something to be ashamed of, though.

I didn’t know any way to calm myself other than with alcohol. I poured half a glass of whiskey, added the same amount of water, and drank. I didn’t do anything afterward, just listened to the clock tick.
The girl came back after drying her hair wearing some of my pajamas and an overly-long gray parka. It was too big even for me, but it went down to her thighs, serving as a one-piece for her.
“Make sure to dry my clothes,” she told me. “I’m going to bed.”

She practically collapsed onto the bed, but then remembering something, sat up, got something from her back, and dove back under the covers with it.
It was no doubt the teddy bear. Holding it tight underneath her chin, she closed her eyes.

I took the blouse out of the washer and dried it with a hair dryer. I could've used the dryer at a laundromat, but walking around outside with a single article of clothing from which the blood hadn't completely come out of seemed... awkward.
It'd be wise to buy her some clothes tomorrow, I thought. She'd probably be getting more things bloody yet.

Revenge. I absolutely couldn't understand how the girl felt. I'd never felt anger strong enough to want to kill anyone. My life had long been ruined, but not by others. The one who ruined me was none other than me.
On top of that, I'd been extremely poor at expressing the feeling of "anger" since an early age. And I wouldn't say it indicated powerful self-restraint; I just didn't trust the manifestation of my anger to have any effect on others.
Whenever I got pissed, I'd preemptively give up and convince myself lashing out would do no good, many times stopping myself in situations when I should have clearly been angry.
Though that habit was useful for avoiding trouble, in the long run, I think it contributed to my lack of zest for life.

I was envious of people who could display their anger without a moment's hesitation. In that sense, though only partial, I felt some envy toward the girl.
Though of course, I also sympathized with her plight, and felt lucky I didn't have to live such a life myself.

Once I was done drying the girl's blouse, I folded it up and put it

next to the bed.
Back in the laundry room, I changed into my pajamas, but felt too awake to sleep. Shivering in the cold, I waited on the veranda for the art student to show up.
But on days like these, she wouldn't come out. Not too far away, I heard ambulance sirens.

Right as I decided to head back inside, the cellphone in my pocket vibrated with a dull sound.
The girl was inside sleeping, and Shindo was dead, so it didn't seem like there could be a single person who would willingly call me now.

"Hello?", I answered.
"Where are you now?", the art student said.
"Didn't you just see me in the hall? I'm at my apartment. You?"
"I'm at my apartment too, of course."
So we were talking over the phone despite being in rooms right next to each other.

"Then come out on the veranda. I was just coming out for a smoke."
"No thanks. It's cold."
"Don't you think this is a waste of your phone bill?"
"I like talking with people over the phone. It's relaxing. You can close your eyes and just listen to their voice. I also like how your voice sounds over the phone."
"*Just* my voice you like, huh."
The art student laughed.

"Things going well with that girl you brought home?"

“I think you’re under a misunderstanding here, so let me just say...”, I began emphatically. “I definitely don’t carry any affection for this girl. Just so we’re clear.”
“I was just teasing. Of course I can tell you don’t have that kind of thing going.”
I furrowed my brow at her, even though she wasn’t there.

“So you called me just to tease me?”
“There’s that. But I’m also in a troublesome state of mind.”
“What would that be?”
“I don’t want to see anyone, but I want to talk to someone.”
“That is troublesome.”
“Only when it comes to that would I bother you, though. I can see you’re busy.”
“So sorry.” I bowed my head toward the wall. “I mean, I’m usually deathly bored.”
“Yeah, well, my fault for getting lonely at just the wrong time. Still... I don’t like it.”

“Don’t like what?”
“How should I put it... I guess, well, you don’t seem like yourself today.” There were a few seconds of thoughtful silence. “Yeah, that’s it, normally you have these eyes like you don’t want to go anywhere. Eyes that aren’t really focused on anything, that are both looking at everything and not looking at anything, careless eyes. That’s the reason I can relax around you. But... when we met in the hall, that’s not how your eyes looked.”

“Then what were they like?”

“I can’t tell you,” she hurriedly said. “That girl’s already asleep, isn’t she? If you’re too loud, you might wake her up. So let’s call it here. Though I’ll call again if I change my mind. Good night.”
Then she hung up.

I stayed out on the veranda for about an hour. But when I came back into the room, the girl still hadn’t fallen asleep.
She wasn’t crying tonight. Instead, she was shivering. Curled up on the bed, tightly holding the pillow and her bear, breathing irregularly. And it was clear it wasn’t the cold to blame.

If she was going to get scared, she shouldn’t have been killing people to begin with, I thought. But that wasn’t going to fly. As she said, she lived thinking about nothing else.
It wasn’t just that she wanted revenge. She also had nothing else to do.

# Chapter 5: The Girl and the Dressmaking Scissors

My first meal in twenty hours was at a family restaurant. Until then, I'd forgotten I was even hungry, but my appetite came back at once when I smelled the food.
I ordered a morning pancake set for both of us, then asked her while sipping coffee:
"We've had your father and your sister, so is your next target your mother?"
The girl slowly shook her head. She was yawning frequently, not having slept very well. Like yesterday, she was wearing my nylon jacket to hide the blood on her blouse.
"No. My mother, at least, didn't bring me that much pain. Not that she was very kind, either. I'll let her off for now."

This early in the morning, customers were sparse. Most of them were office workers in suits, but at the table next to us, a college-age boy and girl were sleeping in their seats, probably having been here since late last night. The ashtray between them was loaded with cigarette butts.
What a nostalgic sight. Until a few months ago, I'd wasted precious time with Shindo at restaurants in much the same way.
What did we even talk about in all that time? I couldn't remember anymore.

"Next, I think I'll get payback on a former classmate," the girl stated.
"It shouldn't require as much travel as yesterday."
"Ex-classmate? Mind if I ask their gender?"
"Female."

“And I guess she left some kind of scar on you too?”

She swiftly stood up and sat down in the seat next to me. Pulling up her uniform skirt, she showed me her left thigh. A moment later, a seven-centimeter long, one-centimeter wide scar appeared there.
Taking off my sunglasses to look, the mere contrast of her white skin and the wound felt painful.
“Enough. Hide that already,” I told her, concerned about those around us. I’m sure she didn’t mean it, but it absolutely looked like she was just showing me her thighs.

“She inflicted it with a shard of glass after pushing me into the mud,” she explained matter-of-factly. “Naturally, it’s not the physical wound she dealt that’s a problem to me, but the emotional one. She was a clever one. She knew very well that shame was the number one way to make people give in.”

“I see,” I remarked with admiration. Much of the bullying that happened during compulsory education could be viewed as “how much shame can I induce?” Bullies knew that it was a very effective way of making people break.
When people come to loathe themselves - that’s the moment when they’re at their most fragile. People who are shamed are told they don’t have anything worth protecting, and lose the will to resist.

“...When I first entered middle school, the school’s delinquents were afraid of me,” the girl said. “At the time, my sister knew a lot of malevolent adults. My classmates thought that if they laid a hand on me, my sister would get back at them. But that

misunderstanding didn't last long. One classmate who lived nearby spread a rumor: "Her sister hates her. I've seen her drag her around and beat her again and again." That turned the tables. The delinquents who once feared me, as if to take out their pent-up anger, made me their punching bag."

She spoke as if all this were a decade or two ago. I felt like I was being told about a past she had long since overcome.

"I put up with it thinking that the situation would change once I advanced to high school. But I was only able to go to a public high school, where many of my middle school classmates went, so nothing changed one bit. No, if anything, it got worse."

"So," I interrupted to cut the story there. I didn't really want to hear her talk too long about such things, and it didn't seem like the kind of history where talking about it would make her feel better. "You're killing again today?"
"...Yes, naturally." With that, she returned to her former seat and resumed eating.

"By the way," she began again, "what happened yesterday was just a little surprising, that's all."
I assumed she was talking about her legs giving out. Well, there was no need to bluff in front of a irrecoverably hopeless guy like me.
"It's not like I'm scared of killing people," she insisted, almost pouting. Maybe the bluff was directed at herself, I realized. Anxious about where her revenge would lead, she told herself that what happened yesterday was just an isolated incident.

“Actually, after yesterday’s experience, I was thinking,” I told her. “If there’s a chance of blood splatter next time too, you should probably prepare some spare clothes.”
“I’ll be fine.”
“Don’t be shy. I’ll pay for whatever clothes you want to buy. The blood isn’t coming out of that uniform, is it?”
“I said, I don’t need it,” she grumbled with irritation, shaking her head.

“Blood isn’t the only problem. After taking revenge on both your father and sister, you should consider that there might already be witnesses. And just wearing a uniform in broad daylight will make you stand out enough as it is. Even your postponement isn’t almighty; it’s hard to handle minor incidents with it, isn’t it? I want to do as much as possible to prevent any trouble.”

“...Those are valid points,” she finally admitted. “Would you buy two or three outfits for me, then?”
“Well, I’m not gonna do it alone, I don’t know much about fashion. Sorry, but I’m gonna have to bring you along.”
“Yes, I suppose so.”
She put her fork on her plate and sighed wearily.

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Puddles formed in the dents of the pavement, reflecting the dull blue sky and black silhouettes of trees.
Fallen maple leaves clung to the sidewalk, and from directly above,

they looked like exaggerated stars drawn in crayon by a kindergartener.
Leaves filled the gutters in the plaza as well, rustling with the ripples made by the water.

I went to the nearest department store to let the girl buy whatever clothes she liked. She wandered around reluctantly in front of the various tenants.
After much deliberation, she set foot into a youth-oriented shop with determination, but that was still far from the end of things.

Following a whole five trips around the store, she held up a calm blue jacket and a caramel-brown skirt and asked, “These aren’t weird, are they?”
“Well, I think they suit you,” I answered honestly.
She glared right at me. “Don’t lie. You’ll just agree with anything I say, won’t you?”
“I wasn’t lying. Really, I think people should just wear what they like, as long as it doesn’t cause others any trouble.”
“Well, aren’t you mister useless,” she muttered. Another entry on my growing list of nicknames.

After trying the clothes on in front of a mirror, the girl put them back where they were and began another loop around the store.
A woman clerk, dressed very provocatively and with long legs, approached and asked with a shallow smile, “Is she your sister?” She’d seen the stormy situation and mistaken us for siblings.
I felt no obligation to respond honestly, so I just answered “Yeah.”

“What a kind brother she has to take her out shopping.”
“I don’t think she feels that way.”
“It’s alright. It might take some years, but she’ll notice her gratitude for her brother eventually. I was the same way.”
“Sure, let’s hope,” I said, faking a pained smile. “That aside, could you help her pick something out? I think she’s really having trouble deciding.”
“Leave it to me.”

Alas, the girl sensed the clerk approaching and quickly fled the store.

After hurrying to catch up to her, she told me with exhaustion “Forget the clothes. I don’t need them.”
“I see.” I didn’t ask the reason. Well, I could more or less guess.

It was about her family. She’d probably rarely been given the chance to buy whatever clothes she liked.
So she shrunk away when faced with the experience of doing it for the first time.

“I’m going to buy a few odd things. Please don’t come with me.”
“Got it. How much money will you need?”
“I have enough to pay for it myself. Just wait in the car. I shouldn’t take that long.”

After the girl left, I returned to the shop.
“Can you choose some clothes that would fit that girl from earlier?”, I asked the clerk, who skillfully picked out some outfits.

Since I figured she might need them right away, I had the clerk take off the price tags too.
And just in case, I went to another shop and bought a blouse similar in design to the now-stained one. I considered the possibility she might be more comfortable in her uniform than casual clothes.

I returned to the car in the underground parking structure, tossed the shopping bags to the back seat, and sprawled out on the seat, whistling as I waited for the girl.
It made me seem no different from anyone else, just a regular shopper - not someone who'd come here to make preparations for murder.

I thought about what would happen when the effects of the postponement ran out. The girl would die, her acts of revenge would all return to nothingness, and instead, the reality of me running her over would return.
Naturally, I would be charged with dangerous driving causing death or injury and arrested. I didn't know in much detail what would happen after that, but I'd probably go to a prison for traffic offenders. My term could be a couple years to a decade, maybe.

Even if I went to prison, that father of mine wouldn't show any particular reaction, I thought to myself.
That man was like a shed skin which, by some terrible mistake, just kept moving. Not even causing death by way of drunk driving would be enough to surprise him.
I figured that unless I did something like what the girl was doing, purposefully taking someone's life with clear intent, I'd never be

able to draw a reaction out of him.
My mom, meanwhile... I could easily imagine her using the news to boost her own confidence, saying “See, look at that! I was right to leave that man.” She was that kind of person.

Give me a break, I sighed. Just what had I been born for? In twenty-two years of life, I’d never once felt a proper feeling of being “alive.”
With no particular goals, nothing to live for, no happiness, I lived just because I didn’t want to die. And this is what came of it.

“...I should’ve given up early and cut my life short like Shindo, shouldn’t I.”
The words that had crossed my mind countless times, I now let out and voiced aloud.
No, I didn’t think that the world wasn’t a place worth living in.
But my life, at least, didn’t seem worth living.

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We arrived at our destination, an amusement center, at around 2 PM.
It was a composite facility with bowling, billiards, darts, a batting center, arcade games, token games, and a number of food and drink shops all in one place.
My head was dazed by the noise, like five hundred alarm clocks going off at once. Just a few months of seclusion had completely erased my tolerance for this kind of chaos.

According to the girl, her next target had dropped out of high school and now worked at an Italian restaurant here.
But I had to wonder, how did she obtain that information? I didn't scrutinize her methods, but no doubt she had spent a lot of time looking into things.

The restaurant had glass walls, so you could easily see what was going on inside. Sitting at a perfectly-positioned bench, I tried to guess which of the workers was the girl's target.
The girl came up to me after she was done changing. I'd told her to do so, because wandering around in a uniform in a crowded place like this could get her taken away by the police.

"That shop clerk made some good choices," I remarked at her outfit. A pin dot one-piece and a moss-green cardigan with boots. "You look really mature in that outfit. Like you could go to college."
Ignoring my praise, the girl requested, "Let me borrow those sunglasses."
"These?", I asked, pointing at them. "Sure, but I think they'll draw more attention."
"I don't care. As long as she doesn't know who I really am, that's enough."

The girl put on the round, shady-looking shades and sat next to me, staring fiercely into the restaurant.
"There she is. That's her."

The person she pointed at - well, just like yesterday - didn't strike me at a glance as someone who'd harm others. She was a relatively

pretty girl you could find anywhere.
The distance between her eyes seemed just a tiny bit too small, but when they were closed, you could very well say they were perfectly-spaced.
Her dark-brown dyed hair was cut short, which gave her character when put alongside her more feminine thick lips and small nose.
She was lively in her speaking and movements. A cheerful girl who young and old alike could adore. That was my first impression of her.
But certainly, not all bad people had obviously bad appearances.

“So she’ll be the next victim of your revenge.”
“Yes. I’m going to kill her today,” the girl carelessly remarked.
“Another scissors-to-the-gut while saying hi?”
She folded her arms and thought. “No, those methods would stand out too much here. We’ll wait until her shift is over. There’s a worker’s entrance in the back, so as soon as we see her getting ready to get off work, we’ll head back there to meet her.”
“No objections. And I’m just waiting in the shadows again?”
“Indeed. If she tries to run, please catch her at any cost.”
“Got it.”

We didn’t know when the woman’s shift ended, so we stayed on the bench and kept a lookout.
The girl got two scoops of ice cream, and I stuffed my cheeks with fish and chips, listening to the sound of pins falling at the not-too-distant bowling alley. Young boys and girls were having a blast all around us.
The fish fry tasted like it had been fried in waste oil, and the

potatoes weren't heated very well, so I didn't eat much of either, washing it down with soda.

At some point, the girl had begun to focus not on the restaurant, but on a claw machine on the side of the path.
Behind the glass was a pile of stuffed toys - all the same creature, one which resembled the child of a bear and a monkey. Just as I turned back toward the girl, we met eyes.

"...Go get me one of those," she requested. "It seems it's still going to be a while."
"I'll keep watch, so you can go get it," I replied, handing her my wallet. "I'll call for you if I see her do anything."
"I wouldn't be able to get it if you gave me a year. You have to do it."
"Nah, I'm really bad at crane games too. Never won a prize from one since the day I was born."
"Just go."
She shoved the wallet at me and hit me on the back.

I broke up a thousand-yen bill at a change machine and stood before the claw. After identifying a stuffed bear-monkey that was close to the opening and seemed relatively easy to push in, I concealed my embarrassment and inserted a coin.
If only she'd come with me so I could at least look *kind* of cool, I sighed. A gloomy college boy trying his darnedest to win a teddy bear in the middle of a weekday was just tragic.

After blowing 1,500 yen, I asked a passing clerk to adjust the

positions for me, and then spent 800 more yen to finally get the toy in the hole.
It was the first prize I'd ever won from a crane game in my life.
Returning to the bench, I handed the bag to the girl, who brusquely accepted it, and afterward, occasionally stuck her hand in the bag to ascertain the bear's fuzziness.

The woman's shift ended after about 6 PM.
The girl stood up, told me "Let's hurry," and left the area. I followed right behind.

It was a moonless night, ideal for revenge. The parking lot by the back entrance wasn't well-lit, either, so there was little need to even hide behind anything.
After being in a bustling place for so long, my ears were still trying to recover, and I felt dizzy on my feet. The cold autumn wind blew at my neck. Feeling chilly, I put on the jacket I was carrying under my arm.

The girl pulled out a leather case from her bag and took out the dressmaking scissors she had used the other day.
With their dark black handles, uneven to make it a better fit for a person's hand, and their silver blades glinting in the darkness, my knowledge of yesterday's incident made me unable to see them as anything other than an implement for hurting people.
Getting another look at them, I felt they had an eerie shape. The holes of the two handles looked like eyes warped with anger.

The woman wasn't showing up. As I began to wonder if we were a

step too late, the back entrance opened.
Having taken off her work uniform and put on a trenchcoat and a wine-red skirt, she looked instantly older than she had while working.
Since she'd bullied the girl at school, I supposed she must have been about seventeen or eighteen as well, but she looked about my age, or a little younger.

She looked at the shivering girl standing before her dubiously.
"Do you remember who I am?", the girl asked.
The woman carefully studied her face.
"Hm, sorry, it's on the tip of my tongue..." She put her finger on her lips in thought.
The girl's expression sharpened. It seemed to jog the woman's memory.
"Ahh, wow. If it isn't you..."
Her cheeks slackened to make a smile.

I knew several people who smiled like that. People who considered beating others down their greatest joy.
They were inordinately good at telling if someone would counter their attacks or not, and thoroughly tormented targets they decided they could easily beat up.
This was the smile of a person who did such things to boost their own confidence.

The woman studied the girl from head to toe. There would be differences between the girl she remembered and the girl now, and she was trying to determine them so she could use them to her

advantage.
She'd already made up her mind on how she felt like treating her.

"So you're still alive?", the woman said.
I considered what that meant. Was it "You'll never have a single good thing worth living for, but you're still alive?", or "I put you through all that hell, and you're still alive?"
"No. I'm already dead," said the girl, shaking her head. "And I'm taking you with me."

She didn't give the woman time to respond. A moment later, she'd stabbed the scissors into her thigh.
The woman gave a metallic scream and collapsed to the ground. The girl looked down on her scornfully as she writhed in pain. The sleeves of her caramel-colored trenchcoat turned red.
But I didn't move a muscle as I watched. Today, I was mentally prepared for it.

The woman took a deep breath to try and call for help, but before she could get a word out, the girl kicked her loafers into her nose.
As she held her face and made a muffled scream, the girl took out a tool shaped like a nail file and began rubbing it along the blades. She was sharpening them.

After five passes on each blade, she discarded the file and lifted the woman up by her hair. The woman watched in horror, and the girl thrust the blades of the open scissors right in front of both eyes.
The moving blade for her left, the still blade for her right. The woman stopped completely.

It was a chilling night. It wasn't yet winter, but my breaths came out white.

"Do you have something to say to me?", the girl inquired.
The woman, face covered in blood from her nose, repeatedly tried to call for help, but could hardly form proper words.
The girl treated her like a child whose words she didn't quite catch. "What was that? "I'm so sorry?""
She pulled the scissors back, and just as the woman felt relieved to have the blades away from her eyes, stabbed the scissors hard into her neck.

Her target wasn't the throat, but the artery. As she extracted the blade, blood flooded out. Not just pouring, but overflowing.
The woman frantically brought her hands to the wound as if she could try and stop the blood from leaving her, but some seconds later, she closed her eyes and ceased breathing in that same position.

"...I got my clothes dirty again," said the girl stained with fresh blood, turning to face me. "I was getting fond of these ones."
"We can just buy new ones again," I told her.

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I figured as much from how pale she was, but after changing into her usual uniform and returning to the building, she sped off toward the bathroom beside the restaurant and didn't come out for

a while.
I heard retching from inside. Sure enough, she was throwing up.

Considering her lack of hesitation in killing people, her reactions afterward were phenomenally normal.
Unlike a cold-blooded serial killer, she had an innate disgust for violence. It must have been so, or else she wouldn't be throwing up and having her legs go weak after her murders.
It must have taken some extreme resentment to turn someone like that to murder.

And then there was me. How could I remain so calm after witnessing a murder? Was I the more deranged one for feeling nothing about being with a murderer?
Well, even if it were so, what did it matter now.

I waited for the girl on a torn-up sofa in the dim hall. She finally returned after three cigarettes' worth of time. Her gait was heavy, and her eyes were bloodshot.
She must have barfed up everything she ate today. Especially thanks to her white clothes, she really looked like she'd lost all color, like a ghost.

"You look terrible," I told her jokingly.
She replied with lifeless eyes, "I always have."
"Not so," I denied.

Strictly speaking, we should have gotten out of there immediately. We'd hid it in some bushes, but it was only a matter of time before

the woman's corpse was found, and the girl's bag contained the murder weapon and her bloody clothes.
My clothes had some hard-to-see blood stains on them too, so we'd be finished if any kind of inspection was done on us.

Despite this, these words came out of my mouth.

"Hey, why don't we call it for the revenge today, do something else instead? You seem really exhausted."
The girl swept the long hair out of her eyes and stared me in the eye.
"...For example?"
I'd expected her to immediately reject the idea, but that reply sounded surprisingly on-board with it. She was just that worn out.
This should score some good points with her, I thought.

"Let's go bowling," I suggested.
"Bowling?" Her gaze turned toward the bowling lanes opposite us, and her eyes widened. "You don't mean, here, right this moment?"
"Right. We'll keep the murder weapon and stay at the crime scene to bowl. Everyone expects a murderer to return to the scene of the crime, but no one expects them to *stay* at the scene of the crime and go bowling."
Are you being serious right now?, she asked with her eyes. Very serious, I responded in turn.

"Not a bad suggestion, right?"
"...No. Not bad at all."
It was a moment in which our poor tastes coincided. Stay at the

crime scene and have some fun. No better way to desecrate the dead.

After signing in at the reception desk, we received bowling shoes that couldn't have a more ugly design and went to our lane.
As I thought, the girl seemed to have no experience with the game of bowling, and even trembled at the weight of the eight-pound ball.

I went first, intending to show her how it was done. I aimed to knock down no more than seven pins, and sure enough, hit exactly seven. I wanted to keep the first strike for her.
Turning around, I told her "It's your turn."
Carefully inserting her fingers into the ball and glaring at the pins, she threw with impressive form and knocked down eight pins. She had a pretty good arm, and good focus.
By the fourth frame, she was picking up spares, and by the seventh, she got a strike.

It was a nostalgic feeling. For a brief time, inspired by The Big Lebowski, Shindo had frequented a bowling alley absurdly often. Ultimately, the best score he managed was around a 220.
I sat on the sidelines and watched, sometimes playing a game with him. Whenever I did, his precise advice helped me play well enough to get up to 180 sometimes. As someone who never got fired up about any one thing for long, I thought that was pretty good.

To stimulate her competitive spirit, I aimed for a score that just barely beat out the girl. For someone hard to please like her, I

thought that would be more effective than losing on purpose.
Sure enough, once the game was over, she was dissatisfied in a good way.
“One more,” she requested. “Let’s play one more game.”

After finishing three games, her pale face had regained a much healthier color.
It seemed the corpse never got found while we were there. Or maybe without my knowing it, the girl had postponed its discovery.
Either way, we were able to pass the time peacefully. After bowling, we had a somewhat fancy meal at the restaurant where the woman she’d murdered worked.

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We didn’t go back to the apartment that day.
The girl told me her next revenge target was a six-hour drive away. I suggested just taking the bullet train in that case, but she instantly denied it, expressing her hatred for crowds.
If it meant not having to take public transportation, she’d rather sit in the hard seat of a busted-up car for half a day with the man who’d killed her.

She didn’t seem to have fully recovered from the shock from killing her classmate. No thanks to her lack of sleep last night either, she was unsteady on her feet as we left the amusement center.
Myself, I’d lived doing nothing but sleep for months now, so I was running on empty, and couldn’t keep my eyelids more than half-open after just 20 minutes of driving.

A honking car horn made me realize I'd passed out - I carelessly fell asleep while waiting at a light.
I hurried to hit the accelerator and heard the engine racing. Irritated, I put the car in drive and hit the pedal again.

As I shot the girl a glance to blame her for not waking me up, I realized she'd nodded off in just the same way.
Maybe all her exhaustion was catching up to her at once, as she was still sleeping soundly through the horn and the following speed-up.

It's dangerous to keep driving like this, I thought. I considered stopping the car somewhere to take a rest, but sleeping in the car like two nights ago wouldn't help our exhaustion much.
It would be better to find a hotel somewhere and get some proper rest there.
I imagined the girl bemoaning this, saying "There's no time. Do you think we can afford to rest?", but it was better than causing a boring accident by nodding off while driving.

It seemed like the girl couldn't use her postponement willy-nilly. For instance, if while she were sleeping soundly, I veered out of my lane and had a head-on collision with a large truck, would she be able to postpone that?
If our death was instant, with no time for her life to flash before her eyes, or for her soul to scream "I can't bear for this to happen," would that make it impossible to postpone?
In fact, maybe she couldn't answer that herself. From the explanations she gave me, she didn't seem to fully grasp everything

about her ability.

I decided we were better safe than sorry. I drove to a business hotel along the highway, and leaving the girl in the car, asked the front desk if there were any rooms available. I was told there was just one room open, with twin beds.
That was perfect. If it had been a double-size bed, I would have had to sleep on the floor.

As I was filling out information on the form, it occurred to me I didn't know the girl's name or where she lived. I couldn't exactly go ask her now, so I used a fake name.
"Chizuru Yugami." Making her out to be my sister who lived in the same apartment seemed like it might be beneficial later. The clerk at the clothes store had mistaken us for siblings too, so it wasn't the most implausible lie.

I returned to the car. Shaking the girl awake, I told her "We'll take a rest here before your next act of revenge," and she came along without complaint.
Though she wouldn't say it, she must have preferred to sleep on a soft bed than the hard car seat.

In front of the automatic doors, I turned back and asked, "It's a single room for two. Is that okay? There were no other rooms available."
She didn't reply, but I decided to take that as meaning "I don't really mind."

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The interior was plain, so it was a business hotel, all right. In the ivory-colored room, there was a square table between the beds with a phone on it, above which hung a cheap-looking oil painting.
In front of the side-by-side beds was a writing desk, with objects like a pot and TV placed on it as if there was no other suitable place for them.

After making sure the door was locked, the girl took the dressmaking scissors covered in dried blood out of her bag and started to wash them in the bathroom sink.
Diligently getting all the stains off, she removed the water droplets with a towel. Then she sat down on the side of one of the beds and lovingly sharpened the blades with a file. Her tool to ensure the success of her objective.

Why scissors? Moving the ceramic ashtray from the writing desk to the bedside table, I lit up a cigarette and pondered. I felt there were far more dangerous weapons one could use.
Did she not have money to buy a knife? Was it because they didn't look dangerous? Or because they were easy to carry? Were they just lying around at home? Were they the easiest thing for her to use? Were these scissors significant to her?

I pictured a scene. After being abused by her father and sister one wintery night, she's locked up in a distant shed, shivering and crying.
But after a few minutes, she gets up and wipes her tears, then

searches through the darkness for a tool to open the outside lock. She's familiar with how to turn sadness into anger, giving her some lonely courage.
Crying about it won't do anything. No one is going to help her.

Pulling open the drawer of a toolbox by one of the edges, a pain suddenly shoots up her finger. She pulls her hand back reflexively, but then fearfully reaches to grab the thing that cut her, and looks at it in the moonlight pouring through an opening.
Rusty dressmaking scissors.

Why would there be scissors here? Wrenches, screwdrivers, pliers, she could understand. Was anything that looked remotely similar just lumped together?
She puts her fingers in the rings. With some effort, she finally pulls the blades apart.
Paying no mind to the blood running from her finger to her wrist, she falls in love with the scissors. Looking at their sharp points, she feels courage welling up from within her.

Her eyes growing accustomed to the dark, she becomes able to vaguely tell the contents of the drawer. She resumes searching the toolbox from top to bottom, despite the drawers' resistance to opening.
Quickly, she finds what she's after. Taking the file, she skillfully begins to do away with the rust on the scissors.
She has all the time in the world.

An ill-omened scratching sound echoes through the shed in the

dead of night.
Someday, she vows. Someday I'll use these to put an end to them.

It was all no more than my own conjecture. But those scissors made me naturally curious.
The girl came back from the shower wearing clean nightwear. The plain white one-piece-style gown didn't seem like pajamas to me, more like a nurse's gown or something.

She finished sharpening the scissors, and as she held them up to her eyes to examine them closely, I asked her, "Can I take a look at those?"
"...Why?"
Good question. If I just said I was curious, I knew she'd immediately turn me down. I searched for more effective words.

Right as she was about to put them back in their leather case, I had it.
"I just thought they were pretty."
Apparently that was an acceptable response. She warily handed them to me. Maybe she was pleased about her favorite tool being complimented.

Sitting down across from her, I held them up to my eyes the same way she'd been doing. I thought the blades were polished so clean as to be mirrors, but surprisingly, it wasn't so.
The important thing was that the points could pierce through flesh; diverting attention to any other areas would just diminish the force of the blades.

Only the minimum amount of rust had been removed - of course, I then remembered it was only in my theoretical story that they'd been rusty.

"Very sharp," I remarked to myself.
When you hold a tool, you can't keep yourself from picturing yourself using it. Staring at these scissors specialized for murder, I was suddenly hit with the urge to stab someone with them.
These sharp blades could easily cut into flesh just as easily as a ripe piece of fruit.

I imagined it. I wanted to stab a person with these scissors; so, who should I stab?
The candidate that immediately came to mind was, of course, the girl sitting restlessly on the bed across from me, staring at the scissors now out of her hands.
Like the teddy bear, the scissors seemed to help give her a sense of security. She might not have realized it until just now when she was relieved of them, and though shaken by her helplessness, was trying to act like she was fine. That's how it seemed.

Without her weapon, the girl was now almost powerless. I thought about what would happen if I stabbed her right here.
If I stabbed her right in the chest, showing nicely through the unbuttoned parts of the gown she was wearing.
Or if I stabbed her throat, that made a comfortable voice like a glass harp.
Or if I stabbed her soft belly with hardly any fat and shook it around inside.

It seemed the girl's scissors had given me the same urge to kill.

I put my index finger in one of the holes and spun the scissors around.
She hurriedly reached out and said "Please give them back," but I didn't stop spinning. I enjoyed my sadistic fantasies.
If she says the same thing two more times, I'll hand them back, I decided - by which time the girl's eyes had already changed color. Clouded, I should say.
It was a familiar expression. The one she wore while confronting her revenge targets.

I felt a hard impact. My vision flashed, and I fell back onto the bed. I felt pain like my forehead had split.
From the smell of ash on my head, I realized she'd hit me with the ashtray.
I sensed her taking the scissors from my left hand. I was worried their blades would be pointed at me in a moment, but luckily, that wasn't the case.

I lay down in pain for a while, then got up and wiped the ash off my shirt.
I touched my forehead to check its condition and found a bit of blood on my fingers, but thought nothing of it, having seen enough blood to bore me in the past two days.
I was more unhappy about getting it on my hands. Sniffing them, they smelled like rusted iron.
I picked up the ashtray from the floor and put it back on the table. The girl sat on her bed, facing away from me.

I'd awakened from a kind of intoxication. I couldn't believe myself. I tried to remain calm, but with all the events of the past few days, I felt like I was steadily losing my mind.
I figured I'd made her angry. But when I touched the girl's shoulder to apologize for my horseplay, her body tightened in fear.
As she turned around, tears ran down her cheeks.

She was more fragile than I'd been thinking. Me holding the scissors with that creepy smile must have reminded her of her bullies.
Once she could tell I wasn't going to attack her back, the girl lowered her head and mumbled.

"...Please don't do anything like that again."
"I'm sorry," I said.

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As I took a hot shower, my ashtray-whacked forehead throbbed in pain. Washing my hair, the shampoo seeped into my wound.
It had been a long time since I'd gotten a wound worth calling a wound. When was the last time I got an injury at all? Turning the shower off, I searched my memories.
Right, three years ago - I walked around all day wearing unfitting shoes, and my big toenail came off; I think that was the last time.

But I was surprised by what happened back there. What if she hadn't hit me with the ashtray? For whatever reason, the idea "I'll kill her" came very naturally to my mind. It felt like my duty, even.

I believed myself to be gentle and entirely non-violent, but maybe I was concealing more violent tendencies than the average person, and they simply never had much opportunity to surface.

As I changed into pajamas and dried my hair, my phone vibrated in the pocket of my removed jeans. I didn't need to check who it was. Sitting on the bathtub, I answered it.
"I was thinking you might be wanting a call from me sooner or later," the art student explained.
"Hate to admit it, but you're right," I confessed. "I was really suffering."

"Listen, I'm calling you from a public phone right now," she said dubiously. "It's a phone booth on the street corner. But there are lots of spider webs above my head, and it's really grossing me out."
"You'll call me from your cellphone when we're right next to each other, but you'll call me from a public phone when I'm far away?"
"I went walking on my own and it started to rain. This booth was the first thing I noticed when I went looking for shelter. You don't get many chances to use a public phone these days, right? But I didn't have a ten-yen coin, so I put in a hundred. So let's talk for a while, okay? ...Hey, did you just say you were "far away"?"

"Yeah." I thought I probably didn't need to explain myself, but I went on. "I'm staying at a hotel, about a five-hour drive from home."
"Hmm. I can't really call you mister shut-in anymore, can I?", she said with concern. "How about the girl? Going well?"
"Nope, I made her cry. She hit me with an ashtray. I'm bleeding

from the forehead."
The art student cackled. "Did you try to do something lewd?"
"Even if I were that kind of person, you'd sooner be my victim than her."
"Oh, I dunno. You seem to like those gloomy girls."

We continued chatting idly for the duration of the 100-yen call. Once it cut off, I finished drying my hair and left the bathroom.
The crying killer was sleeping with her back to my bed. Her long and damp black hair splayed out across the pillow and sheets. Her shoulders calmly rose and fell.
I wish she'd have a nightmare and jump awake, I thought. Then as she trembled, I could make some tactful remark like "Should I buy you a drink?", or "Maybe the air conditioning is too cold. I'll turn it up a little," earning me some points with her.
Then my crime would be atoned for by a tiny bit.

I thought about how if I turned on the TV, I might hear about today's murder, but I saw no point in checking.
I pulled the ceramic ashtray with my blood on it closer, took a cigarette from the desk, and lit it with an oil lighter. Taking in a lot of smoke, I held it for about ten seconds before releasing.
Touching the wound on my forehead triggered a burning pain, but it comforted me how it served as proof of my existence.

# Chapter 6: Pain, Pain, Go Away

The cirrus clouds that covered the sky were like the wings of a giant dove.
Crossing an arch bridge over a huge river made dark and muddy by last night's rain, we went down a small path along a paddy field peacefully twinkling a golden yellow.
Only a few minutes after merging back into the main road, a small town came into sight. Familiar chain stores were aligned in a familiar order, as if placed there by a stamp.

We stopped the car in the parking lot of a tiny bakery and got out to take a big stretch. The autumn wind blew in and tickled my nose with a sharp smell.
Getting out of the passenger's seat, the girl's black hair fluttered up, revealing an old scar about five centimeters long from the corner of her left eye down.
It was a deep, straight wound, as if cut with a razor. She casually covered it with her hand to keep me from seeing it.

She didn't offer any explanation, but I had little doubt it was inflicted by the man who would be her third victim.
A wound on her palm, burns on her arm and back, a slice on her thigh, a cut on her face. They're all over her, I thought.
I almost wondered if it was something about her that caused others to be so violent. Even between domestic violence and bullying, the sheer number of injuries seemed odd.

Like a certain shape of rock makes you want to kick it, like a certain

shape of icicle makes you want to crack it off from its root, like certain kinds of petals make you want to pluck them off one by one... There exist things in the world that, regardless of how cruel it is, you just feel like destroying.
Maybe it was the same way with this girl, I considered. It could even explain my sudden impulse to attack her last night.

But I shook my head. That's just the selfish reasoning of an aggressor. A notion that put the greatest blame on her. That couldn't have been right.
No matter what properties she had about her, it was no reason to hurt her.

We bought a fresh cheese croissant, an apple pie, a tomato sandwich, and coffee for us both, then ate in silence on the terrace.
A few birds circled around our feet due to the breadcrumbs we were dropping. Across the road, children were playing soccer on the playground. A large tree in the center cast a long shadow on the not-so-green lawn.

A man in his forties wearing a gray cap came out of the store and smiled at us. He had short hair, a chiseled face, and a neatly-trimmed mustache. The badge on his chest said "Owner."
"Want a coffee refill?"
We agreed, and the owner filled our drinks with a coffee server.

"Where'd you come from?", he inquired kindly. I told him the name of the town.
"Why, that's quite a ways, isn't it? ...Then you must be here to see

the costume parade, I'll bet? Oh, or are you taking part?"
"Costume parade?", I repeated back at him. "Is there a thing like that here?"
"Ah, so you didn't even know? Lucky you. It's really a sight to see. A must-see, in fact! Hundreds of people dressed in costumes march down the shopping district."
"Oh, so it's a Halloween parade?", I realized, seeing the Atlantic Giant - a giant pumpkin - in the corner of the plaza.

"That's right. The event only started three or four years ago, but it's gotten more popular every year. I'm surprised so many people like costumes, myself. Maybe everybody has a desire to change into something else that they don't show. After long enough, you get fed up with being yourself all the time. Who knows, maybe there's all those people in grotesque costumes 'cause they've got destructive tendencies. ...Honestly, I'd like to take part myself sometime, but I just can't take the plunge."

After those half-philosophical comments, the owner looked at our faces again and asked the girl with great interest, "Say, what's the relation between you two?"
She glanced at me, begging for me to answer for her.
"Our relation? Go ahead and take a guess."
He stroked his mustache in thought. "A young lady and her attendant?"
An interesting comparison, I applauded. Far more accurate than the "siblings" or "lovers" I was expecting, too.

Paying for the coffee, we left the bakery behind.

Following the girl's directions - "Turn right here," "Go straight for a while," "...That was a left turn" - we arrived at the third revenge victim's apartment as the sun was setting.
The 5 PM sunset colored the town like film faded over many long years.

There were no open spaces at the apartment, and nowhere we could park the car nearby, so we reluctantly parked in the lot for an exercise park.
The sound of awkward alto sax practice came from across the river. Probably a band member at a local middle or high school.

"I got this wound on my face in winter of my second year of middle school," the girl told me, finally talking about the injury. "It was during skating lessons given once a year. One of the delinquent students any middle school is sure to have pretended to lose balance and purposefully hit my leg, knocking me over. What's more, he then kicked me in the face with part of the skate. I'll bet he only intended it as one of his usual minor harassments. But skates are easily capable of slicing off even a gloved finger. So the rink turned red with my blood."

She stopped there. I waited for her to continue.

"At first, the boy insisted that I had tripped, fallen, and suffered the injury all my myself. But anyone could tell it wasn't an injury you got from simply falling on ice. Within the day, he admitted to being the culprit, though it was concluded to be an accident. Even though he'd clearly kicked my face intentionally, and many students saw

him do it. The boy's parents came to apologize and paid me as consolation, but the boy who inflicted this lifelong wound wasn't so much as kept from attending."

"Wish I'd brought skates," I idly commented. "Would be nice to subject him to two or three "accidents.""
"Indeed. ...Well, the scissors will do fine." I felt I saw her smirk. "I believe he'll be stronger than the others, so I'll have you accompany me from the start."
"Got it."

Confirming that she had her dressmaking scissors hidden in the sleeve of her blouse, we left the car.
Going up the steel-framed stairs of the apartment, rusted reddish-brown after what must have been nearly thirty years, we stood in front of the room of the man who, after middle school graduation, was failing to find a stable job.

The girl pressed the intercom button with her finger.
Within five seconds, we heard footsteps, the knob turned, and the door slowly opened.

I made eye contact with the man who came out.
Hollow eyes. An awfully red face. Overgrown hair. Sunken cheeks. Unkempt whiskers. Bony body.
He reminds me of someone, I thought, then moments later realized I was thinking of myself. And it wasn't just his appearance, but his general lack of vigor.

“Yo, Akazuki,” he said to the girl.
It was a hoarse voice. And for the first time, I learned that the girl’s surname was Akazuki.

He didn’t seem surprised about his sudden visitor. He looked at the girl’s face, turned away from the scar, and looked sorrowful.
“So if you’re here, Akazuki,” he began, “then I guess I’m the one you’re killing next?”
She and I looked at each other.
“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna resist,” he continued. “But I have some things to talk about with you first. Come on up. I won’t keep you too long.”
He turned his back to us without waiting for a response, and returned to his room leaving us with many questions.

“What now?”, I asked, seeking direction.
The girl was concerned about the unprecedented situation, and nervously clutched the scissors in her sleeve.
Ultimately, curiosity won out.
“We shouldn’t lay a hand on him yet. We’ll hear what he has to say.” The girl paused. “It won’t be too late to kill him afterward.”

But half an hour later, the girl would come to realize how naive her judgement was. Hear what he has to say? Not too late to kill him after?
She had so little sense of impending danger. We should have killed him as soon as possible.

Including her father, the girl had succeeded at three acts of revenge

so far. I suppose that track record made her proud, and subsequently careless.
Getting revenge is simple, and if I feel like it, I can make someone die just like that - that's how we'd come to think.

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Passing through the kitchen with the smelly drain, we opened the door to the living room. The sun from the west hurt our eyes.
Along the wall of the roughly 100-square-foot room was an electronic piano, and the man sat backwards on the stool in front of it.
Beside the piano was a simple desk with an old transistor radio and a large computer. On the opposite side was a Pignose amp and a peppermint-green Telecaster with the logo etched off.
So he seemed to like music, though I doubted he worked in it. I had no proof, so to speak, but people who fed themselves by music seemed to has this particular air about them. This man didn't have it.

"Sit down wherever," he told us. I chose a desk chair, and the girl sat on a stool.
As if to take our place, the man stood up in front of us. He took a stance like he was going to do something, then took a few steps back and slowly sat with legs crossed on the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said, putting his hands on the floor and bowing his head.
"In a sense, I'm relieved. Hey, Akazuki, I know you might not believe

me, but - ever since the day I injured you, I've feared that, you know, someday you'd come to have your revenge. I never forgot that hateful, bloody face you looked up at me with from the rink. Yeah, this girl's *definitely* gonna come back to get me someday, I thought."

Taking a brief moment to look up at the girl's expression, he brought his forehead back to the floor.
"And now here you are, Akazuki. My bad premonition came true. You're probably gonna kill me now. But then I won't have to be afraid anymore tomorrow. So that's not so bad."

The girl coldly looked down at the back of his head. "Is that all you wanted to say?"
"Yeah, that's it," the man replied, still in his apologetic pose.
"Then you don't mind if I kill you now?"

"...Well, wait, hold on." He looked up and slid back. From his initial reaction, I thought him a brave man, but he didn't know when to give up after all. "To be honest, I'm not really prepared yet. And I'm sure you want to know how I predicted your arrival, Akazuki."
"Because my name came up on the news as a suspect?", the girl immediately supposed.
"Nope. All anyone's reported about is that your sister and Aihachi were stabbed."
So Aihachi was the name of the woman who worked at the restaurant.

"And isn't that enough information?", the girl asked. "Someone

who was in that class could guess right away that I was the culprit upon seeing those two names. And you thought that if the killer was who you thought it was, she was very likely to come after you next. Isn't that right?"
"...Well, yeah, you're right." The man's gaze drifted.
"Then this conversation is over. You aren't going to resist, you said?"
"Nah, I won't. But... okay, well, under a condition."

"Condition?", I repeated. This could get troublesome. Was it wise to keep going along with this guy?
But the girl didn't try to put a stop to this. She showed interest in what he was saying.

"I have a request for how I want to be killed," the man said, raising his index finger. "I'll tell you all about it. But... let me pour some coffee first. ...I never get any better at playing instruments, but I've gotten really good at pouring coffee. Weird, huh?"
The man stood up and walked to the kitchen. He had a terrible stoop. Although, I might have looked the same way from the side.

I wondered what he could mean about "how he wants to be killed." Was he simply talking about the method of murder? Or had he pictured a slightly more stylish setting for his death?
At any rate, we had no obligation to hear it out. But if granting a minor request meant him not putting up any resistance, it might not be so bad, I thought.

I heard water running. Before long, a sweet aroma came wafting in.

“By the way, guy in the sunglasses, are you Akazuki’s bodyguard?”, the man asked from the kitchen.
“I’m not here to have idle conversation. Just get to the point,” the girl snapped, but the man paid her no mind.

“Well, whatever the relationship is, I’m happy somebody out there would accompany a killer. Makes me jealous. Yeah... When I was a kid, they told me again and again, “a real friend will stop you when you’re about to do something wrong.” But I don’t think so. What am I supposed to trust about somebody who abandons their friend to become an ally of the law or morals instead? I think a better friend is when I’m about to do something bad, and they just join me in being a bad person without a word.”

The man brought two cups of coffee and handed one to the girl, one to me. “Careful, they’re hot,” he warned.
The instant I took the cup with my hands, I felt a strong blow to the side of my head.

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The world had turned 90 degrees sideways.
I think it took a few minutes to realize the man had punched me. That was how strong it was. Probably used some implement, not bare-handed.
I listened while I lay on the floor, but couldn’t get any meaningful information out of the sounds I was picking up. I had my eyes open, but I couldn’t piece together the images I saw.

The first thing I felt upon regaining consciousness wasn't the pain of being punched, but the heat of the coffee spilled on my shin.
At first, the pain didn't register as pain, but as a mysterious feeling of discomfort. With a delay, the side of my head finally felt like it'd been cracked. I put my left hand to the area and felt a lukewarm sensation.

I tried to stand up, but my legs wouldn't listen to me. He'd planned this from the start, I realized. This man was wary after all, watching for the moment we let our guard down.
I was trying to stay on my guard, but let myself be distracted as he handed me the coffee. I cursed my own stupidity.

My sunglasses had come off, probably when I was punched. I gradually was able to focus my eyes and bring together the fuzzy images. Then, I at last understood what was happening at this moment.

The man was hunched over the girl. The scissors she should have stabbed into him had ended up on the floor some distance from them.
The girl, pinned down with both hands, tried to resist, but it was clear who had the upper hand.

The man spoke with bloodshot eyes. "I've always been after you since middle school, Akazuki. Never thought I'd get my chance like this. You come waltzing right to me, and give me an excuse to claim self-defense? Now *that* is easy pickings, my friend."

He held down her arms against her head with his right hand, and with his left, grabbed her collar and tore away the buttons on her blouse.
She refused to give up and struggled to the best of her ability. “Stop squirming!”, he shouted, punching the girl in the eyes. Twice. Three times. Four.

I’m going to kill him, I vowed.

But my legs didn’t agree with my will, and I collapsed back to the floor.
My retribution for my shut-in tendencies. Six months ago, I would’ve been able to move at least a little more than this.

A sound made the man turn around. He picked something up from my blind spot. An extendable baton with a black luster.
So that’s what he hit me with. Talk about well-prepared.

As the girl took the opportunity to try and grab the scissors, he brought the baton down on her knee. A dull sound. A short scream. After confirming the girl wasn’t moving, he came walking toward me.
He thrust his heel on my right hand with which I was trying to get up. My middle finger, or ring finger, or maybe both, made a moist chopstick-snapping sound.
The two letters “ow” filled my mind hundreds of times, and I couldn’t move until I’d proceed them all one at a time. Sweat ran down me, and I wailed like a dog.

“Don’t interfere. We’re just getting to the good part.”
With that as his warning, the man gripped the baton and hit me with it repeatedly. Head, neck, shoulder, arm, back, chest, flank, everywhere.
My bones creaked with every blow, and my will to resist slowly left me.

Gradually, I came to be able to process my pain objectively. I wasn’t feeling pain, I was feeling “the pain my body’s feeling.” By putting that extra cushion, it became distanced from me.
The man folded up the baton, put it on his belt, and squatted down slowly, still standing on my squirming hand. He didn’t seem to be tired of hurting me yet.

I felt a sharp sensation around the root of my pinky.
The moment I realized what that meant, I sweat like a waterfall.

“Some real sharp scissors we have here,” the man admired.
He seemed lit aflame with excitement. It seemed impossible to put the brakes on his violence.
People in situations like this don’t know hesitation. What’s more, this man was in a position where his acts of violence could be seen as self-defense. If need be, he could get away with that excuse.

“Is this what you were planning to stab me with?”, he asked with quickened breathing.
With that, he put force on the handles. The blades ate into my flesh of my pinky.
I imagined the pain that would come after the surface skin was cut.

The image of my pinky falling off my hand like a caterpillar arose behind my eyelids.
My lower body lost strength, as if I'd been dropped off a cliff. I was afraid.

"Nobody'll notice if a killer has a finger or two cut off, will they?"
You might just be right, I thought.
Immediately afterward, he put all his force into the hand gripping the scissors.
They was a horrific sound. Pain ran up to my brain, and my body felt like it was filling with tar.

I screamed. I desperately tried to get away, but the man's foot stayed still as a vice. My vision dimmed, half-filled with blackness. My train of thought stopped.
It's off, I thought. But the pinky was still on my hand. Though bone was visible through the wounds on the side and it bled dark red, the blades of the dressmaking scissors were unable to cut it.

"Aw, I guess bone is too much for scissors," the man remarked with a click of his tongue.
Though the girl diligently sharpened the points, perhaps she hadn't given the edges that kind of care.

He put power in the scissors once more, cutting into the second joint of my pinky. I felt the blades on my bone.
The pain numbed my brain. But at least this wasn't an unknown pain. It didn't stop my thoughts.

Clenching my teeth, I took the car key from my pocket and positioned it so the point stuck out from my fist.
The man thought he had trapped my dominant hand. He didn't know I was left-handed.

I thrust the key forcefully toward the leg that held my right hand down. It was force that even surprised me.
The man howled like a beast and jumped back. Before he could grab the baton from his holster, I lifted up his ankle and threw him off-balance.
In falling, the man suffered a strong hit to the back of his head. He would be defenseless for at least three seconds. Now it was my turn.

I took a deep breath. For now, I had to shut out my imagination; it was key to abandon all hesitation.
Over the next few seconds, I couldn't imagine my foe's pain. I couldn't imagine his suffering. I couldn't imagine his anger.

I sat on top of the man and punched him hard enough to break his front teeth. I kept punching. The clashing of bone separated by skin echoed through the room at a fixed rhythm.
The pain in my head and pinky fueled my anger. My fist was soaked with the man's blood. I gradually lost feeling in the hand I used to punch him. But so what? I kept punching.
The key was not hesitating, the key was not hesitating, the key was not hesitating.

Eventually, the man stopped resisting. I was completely out of

breath.
I got off the man and went to pick up the scissors beside him, but my left hand was numb from keeping it clenched so tightly. I slouched down and reluctantly grabbed it with my right, but my fingers were trembling too much to get a good grip.
While I was fumbling around, the man stood up and kicked me in the back, then went to grab the scissors.

I miraculously dodged the baton that came swinging toward me the moment I turned around. But losing balance, I was completely defenseless for the next attack.
The man kicked into my stomach. I lost my wind, saliva drooled out of me, and as I looked up in preparation for the baton strike that would be coming in seconds, time stopped.
So it felt.

After a pause, the man slumped to the ground. The girl holding the bloody scissors looked down on him hollowly.
He desperately crawled at me, either running from the girl or seeking my help. The girl tried to give chase, but stumbled and tripped from her wounded knee. But she looked up, undeterred, and crawled after the man regardless with her arms.

Gripping the scissors with both hands, she plunged them into the man’s back with all her might.
Again, and again, and again.

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What a clamor there'd been in the drab-walled apartment room. I wouldn't have been surprised to see the police show up.
Yet the girl and I lay unmoving next to the man's corpse.
Our pain and fatigue was no problem. We felt an primal sense of achievement for "winning the battle." Wounds and exhaustion were just steps toward that achievement.

When was the last time I felt so satisfied? I went back through my memories, but looking in every nook and cranny, found that no experience had made me feel like this victory did.
The satisfaction I felt about my perfect pitching at the semifinals in my baseball days was dirt compared to this.
I didn't feel a shred of apathy. I felt like I was alive.

"Why didn't you postpone it?", I asked. "I thought for sure you'd postpone as soon as things took a bad turn."
"Because I couldn't quite despair," the girl answered. "If I'd been attacked alone, that probably would have activated it. But since you were here, I couldn't let go of the hope that you might manage something."
"Well, yeah. I did do that."

"...Is your finger okay?", she questioned, barely audible. She might have felt somewhat guilty about the wounds inflicted on my pinky with her scissors.
"It's okay," I smiled. "It's like a scrape compared to all the injuries you've taken."
Though I claimed such, to be honest, I was still about to faint from the agony. Looking at the pinky the man had tried to cut off again

nearly made me nauseous. All cut up with the scissors, it was more of a... pinky-*like* object.

Okay, I thought, whipping my aching body to stand up. We couldn't just stay here forever. We had to get away.
I picked up my sunglasses and put them on, cautious of the pain on the side of my head.

Offering my shoulder to the girl with a wounded knee, we left the apartment.
It was gloomy outside, and rather cold. Compared to the bloody apartment room, the air smelled fresh like a snowy mountain.

Luckily, no one even passed us by on the way to the parking lot. Thinking about how when I got back, I'd take a shower, tend to my wounds, and sleep soundly, I took out the car key from my pocket and put it into the cylinder.
But the key stopped halfway; it wouldn't fit all the way in.

I immediately realized why. When I'd thrust the key into the man's leg, it hit his bone and became warped.
I tried to force it in, then tried putting it on the parking bumper and stepping on it to straighten out the distortion, but to no avail.

The girl and I had bloody clothes, and noticeable bruises and cuts on our faces. My finger was still bleeding, and the girl had runs in her black tights.
The one silver lining was that my wallet and cellphone were in my jacket pocket. But we couldn't call for a taxi dressed like this. And

our changes of clothes were in the trunk.

I kicked the car in anger. Shivering from pain and cold, I tried to think. Before anything else, we had to do something about our suspicious appearance.
I couldn't ask for our bruises and wounds to heal right away, but couldn't we at least change our clothes? But two people bloody and covered in bruises going to buy clothes from a store... we'd obviously get arrested.
We couldn't buy clothes because of our clothes. Steal washing from someone's house? No, it was too risky to even come near a residential area looking like -

I heard music in the distance. An eerie, yet cheery and silly song.
I remembered the words of the bakery shop's owner.
"Hundreds of people dressed in costumes march down the shopping district."

Tonight was the Halloween parade.

I reached toward the girl's face, and using the blood from my pinky, drew red curves on her cheeks.
She quickly guessed my intent. She tore up the sleeve of her blouse, and used the scissors to haphazardly cut away the hem on the shoulders and skirt. I too used the scissors to make cuts in my shirt collar and jeans.
We turned ourselves into the living dead.

We took a good look at each other. Exactly what we were shooting

for. With the addition of our excessive destruction, the bruises and even blood could only be seen as cheap makeup.
What would be important now was our expressions.

“So if someone comes up to you, make a face that says, “well of course I look weird.”” I faked a smile as an example.
“...Like this, then?” She raised the bridge of her mouth to a restrained smile.
My reaction came late, because for a brief moment, I felt the illusion that she was actually smiling at me. “Right, perfect,” I told her.

We proceeded down the alley leading to the main street. The music gradually became more audible. The noise piled on endlessly as we approached, eventually getting loud enough to feel in my stomach.
We could hear guides here and there shouting from megaphones. The smell of sweet candy wafted about.

The first thing to catch my eye as we left the alley was a tall, pale-faced man. In contrast to his complexion, his lips were bright red.
His cheeks were torn, his gums extending wide. The eyes lodged in black sockets glared at us from between the gaps of frizzy hair.

What a well-made costume. The wide-mouthed man seemed to think the same looking at us.
He smiled at us and opened his mouth, making it obvious that the teeth and gums were just carefully painted onto his cheeks. I smiled back.

We felt more confident at once, and began to walk proudly down the streets. Many people gave us unreserved looks, but they were all looks of approval for our “costumes.”
There were voices of admiration and praise here and there. So realistic, they said. Well, naturally. They were real wounds, real bruises, real blood. The girl dragged her pained leg along, but even that looked like an act to them.

The costume parade reached the road. The sidewalks were flooded with spectators; making it even a few meters was quite an undertaking, and they could only see just a part of the parade.

At this point, I took notice of a group of about twenty people wearing costumes related to horror movies.
Dracula, Jack the Ripper, the Boogeyman, Frankenstein, Jason, Sweeney Todd, Scissorhands, the twins from The Shining... They had the old and the new.
Because of their makeup, I couldn’t tell their exact ages, but I’d say they were mostly in their twenties and thirties. While there were some costumes accurate enough to mistake for the real thing, others seemed to simply demean the source material.

Along the sides of the road stretched two endless lines of jack-o’-lanterns, lit out their eyes and mouths by candles inside. Nets like spider webs were hung from between trees, and a few giant spiders hung up there as well.
Half the children on the streets were carrying orange balloons, wearing black tri-corner hats and capes.

“Hey!”
Turning around as my shoulder was slapped, I saw a man with his face wrapped in bandages.
The only reason I didn’t immediately run was because I felt like it wasn’t a voice I’d never heard before.
The man unwrapped his bandages to show us his face. It was the owner of the bakery shop, who’d told us about the Halloween parade.

“Well now, that’s not very kind of you. You should’ve told me if you were going to participate,” he teased, giving me a light shove.
“Weren’t you the one telling us you weren’t going to take part?”
“Well,” he laughed with embarrassment. “You leaving the parade already?”
“Yeah. You?”
“Already had my time in the spotlight. I’m amazed at all these people. I got my foot stepped on five times already.”

“Were there this many spectators last year?’
“No, this is a real big step up. Even the locals can hardly believe it.”
“I always thought Halloween didn’t have much of a hold in Japan, but...” I took a look around. “Seeing this, I think that might not be the case at all.”
“Our people love communicating anonymously, y’know. It suits that nature real well.”

“Er, is there a second-hand clothes store around here?”, the girl interrupted. “I accidentally left the bag with my other clothes on the train. I can’t go home looking like this, so I just need to buy

something else to wear. It'd be awkward touching brand-new clothes with my painted-up hands, even if they're dry, so I'd prefer a second-hand shop..."

"That's quite a misfortune," he remarked, and pondered as he fiddled with his bandages. "An old clothes shop... I think there should be one on the other end of that arcade." He pointed behind us.
The girl bowed her head and pulled my sleeve.
"You in a hurry?"
"Yeah, somebody's waiting for us," I answered.
"I see. Too bad, I wanted to talk a little more..."

The owner held out his bandaged right hand for a handshake. Considering my injuries, I hesitated, but firmly grabbed his hand. Without a moment's delay, he roughly grabbed mine, pinky included.
Blood seeped through the bandages. I endured and faked a smile. The girl casually shook hands with him as well.

The arcade was particularly crowded, and it took nearly ten minutes to reach the clothes shop about a dozen meters away.
It was a small place with a floor that creaked with every step. We quickly picked out clothes, put them in a basket, and went to the register. The girl didn't agonize over it this time.

The clerk donning a white mask seemed used to customers like us, and asked "Do you mind if I take a photo?"
I came up with some excuse to deny him and pulled out my wallet,

then was told “Oh, it’s half-off for Halloween.” A discount for costumed customers, apparently.

We wanted to change right away, but first we had to clean up the blood all over us.
Thinking the best course of action would be to use a multi-function toilet, we searched tenant buildings and small department stores for one, but they were in use everywhere we turned. People were probably using them to change into and out of their costumers.
Tired of walking, I wondered if we should just buy a body sheet and slowly wipe ourselves clean with it. But as I looked up, between buildings, I saw a large clock tower on the roof of a middle school.

Hopping the fence, we intruded onto the campus. An elevated washing area behind the building, surrounded by dead trees and with no lighting, was perfect for secretly getting ourselves clean.
The place was serving as a storage area, with numerous remnants from the culture festival lying around. A stage for a play, cartoon costumes, banners, tents, that kind of thing.

I rolled up my shirt and soaked my hands and feet in the numbingly-cold running water. I took the lemon-scented soap near the faucet, made it bubble up, and scrubbed over the blood.
Dried blood wouldn’t come off easily, but I kept patiently scrubbing hard, and it soon reached a certain limit of cleanliness. Soap bubbles seeped into the cuts on my pinky.

Looking beside me, I saw the girl taking off her blouse with her back to me. Her thin shoulders with burn marks were left bare. I

hurriedly turned my back to her as well and took off my T-shirt.
My teeth chattered from the cold of exposing my wet skin to the night breeze. Struggling to make the hard soap bubble, I cleaned off my neck and chest, and put on a T-shirt from the clothes shop that had a tree-like smell.

The last problem was hair. Blood had congealed in the girl's long hair, and cold water wouldn't get it out. As I considered what we could do, the girl took out the scissors from her bag.
Just as I was thinking she couldn't be thinking it, she cut short her beautiful long hair. It looked like she cut up to 20 centimeters off all at once. She tossed the hair fallen on her hands off into the wind, and it quickly vanished into the darkness.

By the time we were fully done changing, we were chilled to the core. The girl burying her face in the collar of a knit coat, and me shivering in a duck jacket zipped all the way up, we walked to the train station.
On the way, the girl gave in to the pain in her leg, so I walked the rest of the way with her on my back.

While trying to buy tickets amid the crowd, I heard the announcement of the train's arrival. Walking quickly across the overpass stairs, we boarded the train emitting a blinding light.
Disembarking 20 minutes later and buying tickets for seats at that station, we transferred to the bullet train. After sitting for about two hours, we got off and again took the regular train.
By this point, I'd hit the limits of exhaustion. Not thirty seconds after we arrived at our seats, I fell asleep.

I felt a weight on my shoulder. The girl was leaning on me as she slept. I felt the gentle rhythm of her breathing, and a faint sweet smell. Oddly, it felt nostalgic.
It was still a long way to our destination, and there was no point in forcing her awake. I'll keep her from feeling awkward when she wakes up, I decided, closing my eyes and feigning sleep.

While hanging just a step away from dozing off, I started to hear familiar stations being announced.
"We're almost there," I whispered into her ear, and still lying against me with her eyes closed, the girl immediately replied, "I know."
How long had she been awake?
Ultimately, she leaned against me all the way up to the moment I stood up out of my seat to disembark.

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We arrived at the apartment after 10 PM. The girl took a shower first, put on the parka that served as her bedwear, swallowed a painkiller, and dove into the bed with the parka's hood over her.
I quickly changed into pajamas too, applied vaseline to my wounds and put bandages over it. I took painkillers with water - one more than was prescribed - and lay down on the sofa.

A sound woke me up in the night.
In the darkness, the girl was holding both her knees on top of the bed.

“You can’t sleep?”, I asked.
“As you can see, no.”
“Your knee still hurt?”
“It does, sure, but that’s not a major problem. ...Um... I’m sure you’re well-aware by now, but I’m a coward,” she mumbled, burying her face in her knees. “When I close my eyes, I see that man behind my eyelids. That blood-covered man kicking and punching me. I’m too afraid to sleep. ...Isn’t it ridiculous? I’m a killer.”

I searched for the right words. Magic words that would calm the storm of all that anxiety and sadness and let her sleep peacefully. If only there were such a thing.
But I really wasn’t used to these kinds of situations. I had no experience whatsoever consoling people.

Time up. Some truly tactless words came out of my mouth.
“How about you have a light drink?”
The girl quietly looked up at me. “...That wouldn’t be so bad,” she answered, pulling away the hood.

I knew it was best to avoid mixing painkillers and alcoholic beverages, and that alcohol and injuries weren’t a good mix either.
But I didn’t know any other way to soothe her pain. I could trust the central-nervous-system-depressing properties of alcohol more than the kind of comforting I’d give, what with my lack of life experience and sympathy for others.

I made two cups of a mixture of warm milk, brandy, and honey on

the stove. I tended to make it for myself on winter nights when I couldn't get to sleep.
As I went to the living room to hand the girl the mug, I recalled how that man had dropped my guard in this same way.

"It's tasty," she mumbled after a sip. "I don't have very good memories of alcohol, but I like this."
Quickly finishing her own cup, I offered her my own, and she gladly drank it too.
The only light was a headboard reading lamp, so I didn't quite notice the girl's face flushing from drunkenness.

Sitting together on the side of the bed, I was just staring at the bookshelves when the girl spoke with a lisp.
"You don't get it at all."
"Yeah, I think you're probably right," I agreed. It was the truth: I couldn't tell what she was saying at all.
"...I think this is when you should score some points," she told me, staring at her knees. "Since I'm in need of consoling, for once."
"You know, I was just thinking that," I remarked. "But I really don't know how to do it. As the one who killed you, nothing I say would be very convincing. In fact, you'd hear it as disgust or sarcasm."

The girl stood up and put the mug on the table, lightly flicked it with her index finger, and returned to sit on the bed.
"Then I'll forget about the accident temporarily, and in the meantime, you rack up those points."
It was seeming like she actually did seek my comfort.

I decided to take kind of a big risk.
“Is it okay if it’s a sort of weird way of going about it?”
“Sure, do what you like.”
“Can you swear you won’t move until I say I’m done?”
“I swear.”
“You won’t regret that?”
“...Probably.”

I sat on my knees in front of the girl and took a close look at the painful bruise on her knee. What had at first been red and swollen ad now turned a violet-ish color.
Touching a fingertip right next to the bruise, her body jolted slightly. I saw her eyes take their wary color. Now, she’d be focusing closely on my hand’s every movement.

The tension gradually surmounted. With the carefulness of literally touching a sore subject, I slowly laid each finger one by one on the bruise, ultimately covering it fully with my palm.
It was now a situation where I could, with just a slight application of force, send significant pain through her knee. That choice admittedly had its own charm.

Though the girl feared, she kept her promise not to move. She kept her lips tight and watched things unfold.
For her, it was clearly a vexing moment. I dared to prolong it for a while.
When the tension reached its maximum, I said those words.

“Pain, pain, go away.”

I removed my hand from her knee and waved it toward the window.
I did it with as much seriousness as I could muster.
The girl stared at me in disbelief. I thought I'd failed.
But after a brief silence, she began to snicker.

"What was *that?* That's so absurd," she said, failing to keep a straight face. There was no sneer to her laughter. She laughed honestly, happily, from her heart. "I'm not a little girl."
I laughed along with her. "You're right, it is stupid."
"I was so nervous about what you were going to do. You had all that build-up, and then just that?"
She fell back on the bed and covered her face with her hands, laughing.

Once her laughing fit concluded, she asked, "So where did you send my pain away to?"
"To all the people who weren't kind to you."
"Well, that's fortunate."

She fumbled to sit back up. Her eyes were bleary from laughing so much.
"Um, could you possibly do that again?", she requested. "This time, on my head full of terrible memories."
"Of course. As many times as you want."

She closed her eyes. I put my palm on her head, and again recited the silly soothing spell.

Not satisfied with that, she requested me to perform it on every one of the injuries she had postponed. Her sliced palm, the burns on her arm and back, the cut on her thigh.
Once I finished with the cut under her eye, she looked so peaceful that I could imagine her pain really had been sent away somewhere. I feel like a wizard, I thought.

“Um, I need to apologize about something,” the girl mumbled. “I said “there was no one kind to me, helpful to me, no boys I like or used to like, no one.” Do you remember that?”
“Yeah.”
“That was a lie. There was once someone kind to me, helpful to me too. A boy I really loved.”
“Once? So, there isn’t anymore?”
“In a sense, yes. And in fact, it’s my fault.”
“...What do you mean?”

But she wouldn’t tell me the rest. She just shook her head, as if saying “I’ve said too much.”
As I discarded my desire to draw it out of her, she gently took my wrist, told me “I'll do it for you, too,” and softly blew on my bandaged pinky.

Pain, pain, go away.

# Chapter 7: A Wise Choice

The sound of crashing thunder woke me up. As I sat up to look at the time, my body ached all over.
I had terrible shakes and a headache. A sense of languidness, like even moving my fingertips took a cheer squad, covered my body.

I couldn't remember it much at all, but I felt like I'd had that dream about the amusement park again. Maybe I was just one to soak in childish nostalgia after severe shock.
In my dream, again, someone was holding my hand. And for whatever reason, as we walked along, lots of the people we passed by glanced our way.
Was there something on our faces? Or was our very presence not suited for this place? Either way, I just shook my head to say "Go ahead; you think I care?", and ostentatiously pulled the other person's hand.

That's where the dream stopped. The sound of the photoplayer lingered in my mind.
Suddenly, I had a thought. Maybe this wasn't the second, or even third time I'd had this dream. The deja vu was just too much. I must have been visiting this place in my dreams again and again, and simply forgetting about it.
Did I have that strong of an inclination toward amusement parks? Or maybe it simply represented an unfulfilled youth, just happening to manifest as an amusement park?

The clock indicated that it was around 2. Thick clouds covered the

sky, making it dim enough to make you think it was night, but it was in fact 2 PM, not AM.
“Looks like we slept a pretty long time.”
The girl, looking at me with her elbows on the table and chin resting on her hands, nodded in response. Her kindness from last night was all gone, and she was back to her sharp-edged self.

After washing my hands and face, I returned to the living room and asked “Who are you taking revenge on today?” But then, the girl quickly stood up and put her hand on my forehead.
“Do you have a fever?”
“Yeah, a little bit. Maybe I caught a cold too.”
She shook her head. “Being severely beaten can get you a fever. It’s happened to me.”

“Huh,” I remarked, feeling my forehead for myself. “Well, don’t worry, it’s not like I’m immobilized. Now, where should I be heading today?”
“To bed.”
The girl thrust me backward. With unsteady feet, I easily fell over and landed bottom-first on the bed.

“Please, rest until your fever withdraws. You’re not going to be any use like that.”
“I can still drive, at least...”
“Drive what, exactly?”
I at last remembered that we’d lost the car yesterday.

“With this temperature, in this downpour, you’ll collapse walking

around in your condition. And you can't make proper use of public transportation, either. For today, it's best to stay put here."
"Are you okay with that?"
"I can't say I am. But I don't think there's any better choice."

She was right. The best plan at the moment was to rest.
I lay down sideways and let all the energy leave me, and the girl pulled up the neatly-folded sheets at my feet.

"Sorry to make you fuss over me. But thanks, Akazuki," I casually told her.
"You're free to apologize if you want," she began, turning her back to me, "but once I've had revenge on the fourth person, it's your turn next. Don't forget that."
"Yeah, I know."
"And please, don't call me that. I hate my last name."
"Got it." I thought it had a nice sound to it, but did it displease her?

"Good. I'll go buy us breakfast. Is there anything else you need?"
"Big bandages and fever relief. But I think you should wait for the rain to die down a little before you go out."
"There's no reason to expect anything to die down just waiting. With rain or with anything."
Leaving me with that, the girl left the room.

Not a minute later, I heard the door open. I thought she must have forgotten something, yet it wasn't the girl who came in, but the art student from next door.
"Whoa, sure enough, you look terrible," she remarked on my face.

She wore warm-looking knit clothes, which contrasted the thin legs coming from her short pants and made them look skinnier than ever.

“At least ring the doorbell,” I advised.
“That girl made a request of me,” she informed me with a hint of annoyance. “We met in the hall and greeted each other, then she broke down in tears and begged, “He has a fever, and he’s in so much pain!””
“That’s a lie.”
“Yep, it is. But the part about her asking me is true. She came to my room and asked, “Could you look after him while I’m out shopping?””
I thought a bit. “That’s a lie too, right?”
“Nope, it’s true. I mean, it’s not like I’d be the one to start a conversation, right?”

The art student bent down to stare closely at my face. Then, her gaze moving to my right hand sticking out of the covers, she let out a “yikes.”
“That’s some injury. She had some pretty bad ones too, but that looks worse than all of them. Don’t tell me you’ve got those everywhere?”
“The hand is the worst of it. The rest are no big deal.”
“Huh. Even so, that’s really bad, there. Hold on a second, I’ll bring some first-aid from my room.”

She hastily left the room, then walking quickly on her way back in, cut away the blood-soaked bandage with scissors and examined the

pinky.
“Did you wash this?”
“Yeah. Very carefully with running water.”
“And I’ll just ask up front, do you want to go to the hospital?”
“Nope.”
“I figured.”

She began to treat my wound with clear expertise.
“You’re good at this,” I remarked, looking at my taped-up wound.
“My little brother was always getting injured as a kid. I’d be reading a book in my room, and he’d come in and proclaim “Sis, I got hurt,” proudly showing me his wound. So I took care of them. Not that he ever got a wound this bad. Don’t tell him, he’d probably get jealous.”

After checking on the condition of my other injuries as well, she shook her head and went, “Well. What on earth happened to you two?”
“We very cordially fell down the stairs together.”
“Hmm?” The art student narrowed her eyes with suspicion. “And after hitting yourselves all over, you somehow got two wounds on your pinky like you were cut with something sharp?”
“Exactly.”

The art student wordlessly hit my pinky. She smiled with satisfaction seeing me wince from the sudden pain.
“So, have any plans to fall down the stairs again sometime soon?”
“Can’t say we don’t.”
“Do you two have some connection to those two women who were

stabbed in the past few days?”

I glanced toward the girl’s dressmaking scissors on the table - an extremely careless thing for me to do. But the art student didn’t seem to notice the unnatural movement of my eyes.
I mentally complimented her for her good intuition.

“Dangerous times, huh? Well, we’ll be careful.”
“You’re really not connected at all?”
“No, unfortunately.”
“...Huh. That’s boring,” she pouted. “If you were killers who’d killed two people, I thought you might kill me too while you were at it.”
“What do you mean by that?”, I asked.

“Well, basically, if I found out you were a killer, then I’d threaten you. “I don’t care what your reasons are, I can’t overlook a friend doing evil. I’m telling the police!”, I’d say, heading for the station. You’d try to stop me at any cost, but my resolve would be firm, so you’d decide you’d just have to kill me too, and stab me to death the same as when you killed those other women. Happily ever after.”

I spoke accusingly. “I wasn’t asking about how it would go down. Why would you want to be killed?”
“That’s as hard as if you asked me “Why would you want to live?””, she shrugged. “I had you pinned as someone who, between the two, wouldn’t want to live. But am I wrong? Is that change in your eyes in the past few days because that girl’s given you something to live for?”

I remained silent, then heard a noise at the door. The girl had returned.
Entering the living room with shopping bags, she observed the tense atmosphere filling the room and came to a stop.
The art student looked back and forth between the girl and I, then lept to her feet and took the girl's hand.

"Hey, I can neaten up that hair for you," she told the girl while running her fingers through it. Then she whispered to me, "Don't worry, I won't sneak a bite."
"I trust your barbering skill, but you should check with her first," I advised.
"You'll cut my hair?", the girl asked blankly.
"Yeah. Leave it to me."
"...I see. Thank you. Go right ahead."

I was iffier about the decision than I let on, but decided to leave it up to the girl. I'd thought she didn't care much about her hair, so it was a bit surprising.
I had some uneasiness about what the art student would do to the girl, and what she might say, but on the other hand I was willing to trust her skill, and looked forward to seeing the new haircut.
At any rate, seeing something made more beautiful than before was always good.

The two vanished into the art student's room. I moved the shopping from the bag into the fridge, set Chaos and Creation in the Backyard in the CD player and played it at low volume, then fell back onto the

bed again.
I stopped hearing thunder, but the rain seemed to get more intense. The driving rain assaulted the window with raindrops.

I was all alone for the first time in a while.
As a sickly child, I often spent weekday afternoons staring at the ceiling or out the window like this. Rainy afternoons when I took the day off school and slept all day alone gave me a feeling of being cut off from the world.
Sometimes I'd begin to worry that the world had ended outside my house, and unable to bear the silence, I'd go around turning on the TV, radio, alarm clocks, all the machines around the house.

These days, I knew that the world wouldn't so generously end, so I didn't go around making machines sound off.
Instead, I wrote a letter.

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I myself had practically forgotten, but the events of the past few days had all started because of my correspondence with Kiriko.
It was because I'd broken off relations with her and then, so much time later, sought a reunion, that I was helping a girl commit murders and lying wounded in bed.

This may not be the proper way to describe it, but... The truth was, even after I stopped communicating with Kiriko, I kept writing letters. And if you asked me who they were directed toward, indeed, they were to Kiriko.

However, I only wrote about twice a year, and obviously never put them in the mailbox.

When I had something happy to report, or when I had something sad to report, or when I felt unbearably lonely, or when everything seemed futile.
To stabilize my mind, I wrote letters with no intent of sending them, even applying a stamp, then put them away in a drawer. I was aware how bizarre it was, but I knew no other means to console myself.

So I thought I'd do that, for the first time in a while. I put stationery on the table and grabbed a ballpoint pen. I hadn't been thinking about what I would write, but as I began to write about the last few days, I found myself unable to stop.

I wrote about driving drunk and running someone over. The girl who should have died standing before me unhurt. Her "postponement" ability. Coming to assist in her revenge.
Her stabbing her victims to death with dressmaking scissors without hesitation. Her having her legs give out, or throwing up, or losing sleep after her murders. Us staying to enjoy bowling and a meal after killing her second victim.
The severely painful counterattack made by her third victim. And I wrote about how, despite being bloody and beaten, we made it back home without anyone stopping us thanks to the Halloween parade.

"And I think none of it would have happened to me if I hadn't felt

the urge to go meet you."

After wrapping it up with that, I went on the veranda to smoke. Then I went back to bed and took a nap.
Despite it being stormy outside, it was a peaceful afternoon. It almost had a holy feel to it.

If the girl hadn't postponed the accident, what would I be doing now?
I tried to avoid thinking about it too deeply earlier, but I couldn't help pondering that very real question while sitting around on my ownsome.

If I'd given myself in right after the accident, it would currently be over four days since my arrest.
The detective and prosecutor would have already done their investigation, and I'd either be preparing for questioning in court, or already done with that and staring up at the ceiling of a prison cell.

However, that was the optimistic prediction. It was possible that, in the post-postponement world, I had long since committed suicide. Truly giving up on life at the point I ran the girl over, perhaps I'd found a sturdy tree nearby and hung myself from it.
It was an scene easily imagined. Putting my neck inside the noose, I'd spend a few seconds thinking about the past, and let that hollowness push me off the edge. The tree branch would creak from my weight.

Many people think suicide takes courage. But I feel only those who

haven't thought deeply about suicide would think that. It's a misjudgement to say "If you have the courage to kill yourself, you can put it to other uses."
Suicide doesn't require courage, only a bit of despair and a brief fit of confusion. Just a second or two of being at a loss can produce a suicide.
Essentially, people with courage to die don't commit suicide - people without courage to live do.

A prison cell, or hanging from a tree (or maybe at a crematorium). A depressing thought no matter what.
So that I could currently be lying in a comfy bed and listening to my favorite music was truly a miracle.

The CD had begun a second loop. I whistled along to Paul McCartney's Jenny Wren.
The rain ended up pouring all day.

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Around 6 PM, I woke up from hunger. It occurred to me I hadn't eaten much of anything today.
I got up to go to the kitchen, one-handedly opened a can of Campbell's chicken soup the girl had bought into a bowl, added water and heated it. Just then, the girl returned.

The long hair that I'd come to strongly associate with her was trimmed to reach the base of her neck. Her formerly nearly eye-covering bangs, while still long enough to keep the wound under

her eye not too noticeable, now had a refreshing lightness.
She did a good job, I thought to myself, impressed by the art student's hair-cutting skill.

She noticed what I was doing. "I'll do that, so just get to bed," she told me and shoved me into the living room.
I noticed the bruises on her face were gone. I wondered if she'd postponed them, but that seemed unlikely; the art student probably just covered them with makeup.

"Did she say anything strange to you?", I asked.
"No. She was very friendly. I felt she wasn't a bad person. Although there was a bit of a mess in her room."
I thought to explain that it wasn't a "mess," per se, but decided against it as there was no point convincing her of it.

"Pretty good, isn't she? I had her cut my hair once too, and she was considerably better than a bad hairdresser. She always had an undying hatred of going to hairdressers, or, I guess an undying hatred of hairdressers, so she cut her own hair and eventually ended up being that good."
"Please stop making idle talk. Your fever's never going to go down at that rate."

A few minutes later, the girl came with a cup full of soup. "Thanks," I said as I reached for it, but she brushed my hand away.
"Open your mouth," she sternly instructed.
"No, you don't need to go that far..."
"Just do it. Your hand's injured, isn't it?"

With no time to explain that only my right hand was injured and it wasn't my dominant one, the girl brought the soup up to my mouth. I reluctantly opened wide, and she poured it in.
It wasn't hot enough to cause burns, nor was it disgusting enough to make me throw up. That fact that it actually was just perfectly safe and comforting chicken noodle soup made me uneasy.

"Not too hot?", she asked.
"A little hot," I replied. She scooped it up with a spoon and blew on it before transporting it to my mouth. Perfect temperature. The spoon left my mouth. Slurp. Swallow.
"So, about your next target...", I began to say, but was interrupted by the spoon again being thrust in my mouth. Slurp. Swallow. "Be quiet and eat," the girl said. Slurp. Swallow.

The thought that I was being nursed by a person who I had killed in my own carelessness was more than I could handle.

"...I'm not really suited for this, am I?", the girl asked once I finished my soup.
"No, I think you did great," I replied with slight hesitation, and she tilted her head.
"I think you're misunderstanding. I was talking about revenge."
"Oh, you were? I thought you meant nursing me."

The girl lowered her head and stared into the empty cup. "To be honest, I'm scared about my next act of revenge."
"Anyone would be scared to kill a person. It's not like it's just you," I

encouraged. “Besides, you’ve killed three people now. You can’t say you’re “not suited” for it, can you?”
She slowly shook her head. “It’s killing three people that’s made me feel that I’ve reached my limit.”
“You’re pretty timid, huh. Well then, do you want to give up on revenge, forget your resentment, and just live the rest of your days in peace?”

I said this meaning to instigate her, but contrary to my intent, she seemed to take it literally.
“...Honestly, that would be a wise choice, wouldn’t it.”
“After all,” she quietly mumbled, “as you say, revenge is just meaningless.”

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November 1st. It was six days since the accident that killed the girl, putting us past the halfway point of her estimated expiration date of ten days.
In spite of this, she didn’t get moving at all in the morning. My fever had gone, and the rain had reduced to a drizzle, but right after breakfast, she got right back to bed and pulled the covers over her head.

“I don’t feel well,” she said. “I won’t be moving for a while.”
It was clearly feigned illness, and she made no attempt to hide it, so I just asked directly.
“Are you giving up on revenge?”
“...Not at all. I’m just not feeling at my best. Please, leave me

alone."
"I see. Well, tell me if you change your mind."

I sat down on the sofa and picked up a music magazine from the floor, opening up to an interview with an artist I'd never heard of.
I couldn't have cared less about it. I had no reason to be just relaxing and reading in a situation like this.
After finishing the 5-page interview, I flipped back to read it again from the start, this time counting how many times the word "pathetic" was used.
It came out to 21, which was far too many times, and I too felt pathetic for having counted. Didn't I have anything else to do with my time?

The girl poked her head out from the covers. "Um, could you go out walking somewhere for a while? I want to be alone."
"Got it. How long is a while?"
"Five or six hours, at least."
"Call me if anything happens. There's a public phone outside the apartment, but I'm sure the girl next door will gladly let you borrow hers."
"Understood."

I had no umbrella, so I put up the hood of my mod coat, put on my unforgettable sunglasses, and left the apartment.
The mist-like rain slowly seeped into the coat. The people on the road were driving with care with their fog lights on.

Having no destination, I stood at a bus stop and got on a bus that

arrived 12 minutes late.
It was crowded inside, and the mix of body odors made a stale smell. The bus shook violently, and with my weak knees, I nearly lost balance many times. Indecent things were written on the foggy windows in childish writing.
I got off at a shopping district, but I'd given very little thought about how I was going to spend five hours here - practically none at all. I went into a cafe and sipped on coffee to think about it, but no good ideas came to mind.

No matter what I did now, it would have no effect on me once the postponement went away. In reality, I was "actually" in a prison cell, or had long since dropped dead.
I could accumulate good deeds or commit evil ones, spend a ton of money, show blatant disregard for my health - and once the girl died, it would all be nullified. I had the ultimate freedom.

I can do whatever I want, I thought. So I asked myself: What do I want to do?
But I had no answer. There was nothing I wanted to do. Nowhere I wanted to be. I wanted nothing.

What had I enjoyed in the past? Movies, music, books... Maybe I had slightly more interest in them than the average person, but not one of those did I feel so passionately about that I couldn't live without it.
Perhaps I came to enjoy their entertainment because, at one time, they filled a vast emptiness in me. I appreciated these works to stave off sleepiness and boredom, like downing bitter medicine.

But in the end, all I got from the effort was knowledge of the vastness and depth of my emptiness.

I'd previously thought that when people spoke of having a hole in them, they meant a space that should have been filled but wasn't.
But my perception had recently changed. It was a bottomless pit which would make anything you threw into it vanish. An infinite nothingness that you couldn't even call "zero." That's what I have inside me, I came to think.
The mere thought of trying to fill it was pointless. There was nothing else I could do but put up walls around it and do my best not to touch it.

Upon realizing that, my hobbies shifted from the "filling" type to "building walls." I came to appreciate works that purely aimed for beauty and pleasantness, rather than introspective ones.
That didn't mean I was able to deeply enjoy beauty or pleasantness, but it was preferable to facing up to my hollow insides.
But now, considering that I could possibly be dead in a few days, I didn't feel like building walls still. I was like a child with a new toy - shouldn't I be getting more honest enjoyment out of it?

I got an early lunch and wandered around the shopping district, looking for something to make my heart dance.
I noticed a group of college students on the opposite sidewalk. They were familiar to me; they were classmates in my department.
Quickly counting them, over 70% of my class seemed to be there. I thought about what kind of get-together it could be, and concluded they had probably finished an interim report on their graduate

thesis topic. It was about that time of year.

They were all laughing together, the relief of having finished something on their faces. Not a single person noticed me; they might have forgotten what I looked like entirely.
While I was at a standstill, time went on as usual for them. While I lived interchangeable days, they matured from their day-to-day experiences.

The fact that when faced with such a decidedly loneliness-inducing sight, I was hardly hurt at all, was indicative of a fundamental problem.
I had always been this way. If I could just feel hurt at a time this like a normal person would, my life would have been at least a little bit richer.

I recalled that, in my third year of high school, there was a girl I had a slight interest in. I would describe her as quiet, and she liked taking photos.
She always concealed a retro toy camera in her pocket, and would pull it out to snap a picture with no rhyme or reason that anyone else could understand.
She did have a single-lens reflex camera, but didn't like using it, claiming "I don't like how it seems like I'm threatening people with it."

From time to time, she would choose me as her subject. When I asked her why, she said "You're a subject well-suited to low-chroma film."

“I don’t get what that means, but I don’t think I’m being complimented.”
“Nope, not really a compliment,” she nodded. “But it’s fun taking photos of you. Like taking photos of a disinterested cat.”

As summer ended, a contest approached, and she took me around town.
Most of the places we went were cold, desolate ones - parks covered in weeds, big empty cutover areas, stations that didn’t even get ten trains a day, abandoned lots with rows of old buses.
I would sit there, and she would click the shutter again and again.

At first, I found it somewhat awkward to have my image semi-immortalized, but upon realizing she viewed me from a purely artistic standpoint, that went away.
Still, when I watched her take great care in filing photos which contained me, my heart was at least somewhat moved.
When she took a good photo, she showed it to me with a childlike smile that she wouldn’t have in the classroom. The thought that I might be the only one who knew that smile made me proud.

One clear autumn Saturday, I heard that the photos she took won a prize in the contest, so I walked out to the place where they were being put on display.
Seeing those photos with me in them displayed in a gallery, I thought, I’ll have to treat that girl to a meal next time we meet.

By complete chance, I saw her at a general store on the way home. There was a man beside her - a college student, dressed

handsomely and with hair dyed brown.
The girl tried to link arms with him, to which he sort of rolled his eyes but went along with. She had an expression I'd never seen before. So she can look like that too, I thought in wonder.
After seeing the two hide away and kiss, I left the store.

After the contest ended, she stopped talking to me. I didn't care that much for us talking without photography as an intermediary, so I didn't feel like going to talk to her either. So that was the end of our meager relationship.

And I didn't really feel hurt then, either. I thought maybe I just wasn't conscious of it and it would resound with me later, but it didn't.
I wasn't just quick to reconcile. Surprisingly, as soon as I saw her with him, I didn't feel a shred of jealousy or envy. I just thought "I'd better not bother them."
From the beginning, I must not have had any notion that she would be "mine."

People might say that's nothing more than a case of sour grapes. You can't get anything, so you're just pretending like you never wanted anything.
If that were true, then how great would that be? If there were a boiling desire simmering in my chest, ready to erupt at any moment - I'm just not noticing it.
But I'd searched within myself so much for such a thing, and found not a trace. Just a stale gray expanse.

Ultimately, I was a person unable to desire anything. I'd lost that ability so long ago, I didn't have any memory of ever having it. Or maybe I was never equipped with it from the very beginning.
And having so easily done away with the only exception to the rule, my relationship with Kiriko, now I couldn't even find a use for myself.
What was I supposed to do with... with *this?*

I went into an alley and down some sudden skinny stairs. There I found the arcade Shindo and I used to hang out at all the time.
As one could imagine from the faded sign, it was a place full of cabinets that were probably all older than I was, so it was hard to call it "youth-oriented."
The change machine covered in gum tape, the sooty ashtray, the sunburnt posters, the cabinets worn away at the edges with their fuzzy screens and cheap beeps and boops.
I associated this complete lineup of things that had long outlived their usefulness but were desperately being kept alive anyway with a giant hospital room. Well, morgue is more like it.

"The reason I choose to go such a boring place," Shindo told me, "is because I don't feel anything urging me on here."
I became fond of the arcade for that same reason.

I hadn't been there in months. I stood in front of the automatic doors and waited, but they didn't open.
There was a notice on the wall next to them.

“The arcade will be shutting down as of September 30th. Thank you for your many years of patronage. (Note: Closing time on the 30th will be at 9 PM.)”

I sat down on the stairs and lit a cigarette. I think someone threw out the contents of the ashtray, because there were hundreds of trampled cigarettes scattered around.
The cigarette butts, reduced to their brown filter, looked like empty ammo cartridges when soaked in the rain.

Now I really was out of places to go. I left the shopping district for a random park.
Spotting a bench with no back, I swept away the pile of fallen leaves and lay down on my side, not caring if anyone saw me.
The sky was full of heavy clouds. A red maple leaf slowly danced to the ground, and I grabbed it with my left hand.

Putting the fallen leaf to my chest, I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds in the park. The chilly wind, new leaves falling on top of leaf piles, birds chirping, gloves catching softballs.
A strong breeze blew, dropping many red and yellow leaves on me.
I don’t want to take another step, I thought. I’ll just let myself be buried under these leaves.

*This is my life.* Seeking nothing, my soul sputtering out without ever being lit aflame, a life that just progressively rots away.
But I still wouldn’t allow myself to call it a tragedy.

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I finished shopping and returned to the apartment slightly earlier than I was told to. I'd walked for about an hour with a carrying case over 20 kilograms on my back, so I was all sweaty.
I placed it on the living room floor, and the girl looked at it, took off the headphones connected to the CD player, and asked me, "What is that?"

"An electronic piano," I told her, wiping away sweat. "I thought it'd be boring for you to just sit around inside."
"I won't play it. I already gave up on piano."
"Oh, so it was a worthless purchase, huh?" I furrowed my brow. "Have you eaten anything since I left?"
"I haven't."
"You should get something in your stomach. I'll fix something right away."

I went to the kitchen and warmed up the same canned soup the girl had fed to me yesterday.
She sat on the bed staring out the window, then saw me holding out the spoon at her and looked between the two. After about five seconds of confliction, she shyly opened her mouth.
Yesterday, it had seemed like she had no resistance to this kind of thing, but apparently it was a different story when she was the one being nursed.

As I brought the spoon into her mouth, she closed her thin yet soft lips.
"I'm not going to play that piano," she insisted after taking a first

gulp. “I’m sick too, after all.”
“I know. You won’t play it.” I held out a second spoonful.

But an hour later, the girl was sitting in front of the piano. Apparently, she couldn’t bear listening to me testing all the sounds right next to her.
I set it up in front of the bed, and she gently brought her fingers down on the keyboard. After briefly savoring this moment with her eyes shut, she warmed up her fingers by playing a few of Hanon’s most important etudes, so accurately that you couldn’t expect much better.
The volume was loud enough to be heard next door, but it was no problem, as I figured the art student would tolerate this kind of quality.

I don’t have the best ears, but I could still tell that the girl made some major mistakes with her left hand. And her right hand’s playing was wonderful, so it stood out terribly.
Her left hand, paralyzed where it had been cut, must have felt like a leather glove to her. Seemingly conscious of it herself, she’d sometimes loathsomely glare at the hand.

“It’s awful, isn’t it?”, she sighed. “Before the injury, it was my one redeeming feature. But now, this is how it sounds. I feel like I’m using someone else’s hand. Now I can only put on performances that make both the player and listener uncomfortable.”
After making three mistakes with her left hand, she stopped playing.

“Well, why don’t you try actually using someone else’s hand?”, I suggested.
“...What do you mean?”
I sat down next to her and put my left hand on the keyboard. She looked at me suspiciously, but with a look that said “Oh, very well,” began to play the right hand part.

Luckily, it was a famous song even I knew: Chopin’s Prelude No. 15.
I joined in at the third measure. I hadn’t played piano in a decade, but the electronic piano’s keys were lighter than a grand piano, and my fingers moved fairly smoothly on them.
“So you can play piano,” the girl remarked.
“Only well enough to fake it. I just had a few lessons when I was a kid.”

With my right hand injured, and her left hand paralyzed, we supplied each other the hands we lacked. And our playing meshed together quicker than I expected.
When the tone shifted at the 28th measure, the girl leaned toward me to reach for the low notes.
That sensation reminded me of when she fell asleep on my shoulder on the train two days ago. Though now I wasn’t wearing a coat, so I felt her warmth more distinctly.

“Aren’t you supposed to be sick?”, I asked.
“I got better.”
In contrast to her blunt tone, the notes she played had a kind sound and closely interacted with my own.

Playing this and that, three hours passed in a blink. We started to notice each other's fatigue, so we played the Bee Gees' Spicks and Specks as a cooldown, then turned off the piano.
"Have fun?", I asked her.
"It worked to stave off boredom," she replied.

We went on a walk and got dinner at a local restaurant. Back at the apartment, I made brandy and milk which we drank while listening to the radio, then both hit the hay early.
The girl spoke not a word about revenge that day.

Maybe she has given up on revenge. She claimed she would still continue with it, but I was sure she was just being stubborn.
Deep down, she couldn't really feel like killing any more people. What awaited her after the terrifying experience of murder was fear that made her legs give out, sickness bad enough to make her throw up, and guilt-induced insomnia. And there was the possibility of an unprecedented counterattack like two days ago.
By now, she concretely understood the pointlessness of revenge.

Today must have been an extremely peaceful day for her. She got to lie down under the covers wearing headphones and listening to music all day, play piano as she pleased, eat out, drink brandy, and go back to bed.
Such days seemed like they were rather rare in her life.

I hope she can accept this kind of life, I thought. She could forget all about her revenge, and until the day her postponement's effect runs out, enjoy meager yet definite happiness like today.

Buying clothes, listening to music, playing piano, going out and having fun, eating tasty food. She wouldn't have to have her legs go out, or throw up, or get beaten by anyone.
I, too, wouldn't have to serve as an accomplice to murder anymore, and might avoid being "subjected to a suitable fate" as her fifth victim.

Was there any way I could guide her toward abandoning revenge? The piano, I felt, was a pretty good idea. I wondered if there were anything else she might like. Maybe I could talk with the art student about it?
As I stared at the ceiling dimly thinking it over, the brandy took effect, and my eyes drifted shut.

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Even while I slept, my brain kept thinking.
I was overlooking some things.

For instance, there was a feeling of wrongness over the past few days that I couldn't identify.
It hit its peak yesterday, when the girl said: "After all, as you say, revenge is just meaningless."
I should have been longing to hear those words. The girl becoming passive about her revenge should have been a very happy occurrence to me.

Should have been, yes.
So then why did I feel such an intense disappointment?

The answer came relatively quickly. Maybe I didn't want to hear her being so timid. I didn't want her to so quickly reject what she'd been doing up until then. I didn't want her to so easily discard that passion, that intensity.
In a way, I looked up to the girl as she acted as an embodiment of anger.

But is that really all?, I heard a voice ask.
Yeah, it is, I replied. I wanted to always feel that powerful passion I felt from her, because it was something that would never, ever come out of me.
Wrong, the voice said. That's just an after-the-fact interpretation. You were disappointed for a simpler reason. Don't confuse yourself.

I heard a sigh directed at me as I puzzled.
All right, I'll give you a hint. First and only. If you don't get it after this, I'll be wasting my time saying anything else.
I'll only say this once.

"Is that "passion" you feel really coming from *her?"*

That's all.

I closed my eyes and thought about it again.
I smelled a nostalgic aroma of flowers.
I thanked Shindo.
I'd realized what was wrong.

---

I lept awake in the middle of the night. My heart was racing. Something welled up my throat - not nausea, but an urge to shout.
My head was clear, like I'd woken up for a decades-long sleep. As I stood up, I stepped on a CD case and heard it crack, but I didn't care about that right now.
I filled a glass with water from the sink and drank it down, turned on the lights in the living room, and shook awake the girl, sleeping with the covers pulled over her face.

"What do you want at this hour?" She checked the clock beside her, then pulled up the covers to escape from the light.
"We're going to do your next act of revenge," I explained, pulling away the covers. "There's no time. Wake up and get ready."
She pulled the covers back over her and held them with her arms. "Can't it wait until morning?"
"It can't," I insisted. "It has to be right now. I feel like by tomorrow, you won't be a revenger anymore. I don't want that."

The girl turned over to put her back to me.
"...I don't understand why you would be so enthused," she mumbled. "Wouldn't it be more convenient for you if I did quit revenge?"
"I thought that, too. But I've changed my mind after having two days to sit and think about it. Or I guess maybe I just noticed how I really felt. The point is, I want you to be a merciless revenger. I don't want you to take the "wise" choice."

“That sounds like exactly the opposite of what you’ve been saying. Weren’t you the one who said revenge was pointless?”
“That was so long ago, I forgot it.”

“Not to mention,” she yawned, curling up and hugging the sheets tighter, “after killing my next target, you do realize you’d be next?”
“Yeah. But so what?”
“Are you that desperate to get my good graces?”
“No, this has nothing to do with “scoring points.””
“Okay, so you’ve just gone mad,” she muttered. “I’m going to sleep. You sleep too, and cool your head. Once it’s morning and you’ve calmed down, we can talk about this again. ...Now turn off the lights.”

I pondered. How could I explain this so that she would understand?
I sat down on the sofa and waited for the right words to come to mind.

“Come to think of it, there were signs since your first murder.” I chose my words carefully. “When you killed her, your legs gave out, right? Honestly, I found myself thinking “What a cowardly murderer.” ...But it wasn’t you acting strangely, it was me. Your reaction was normal, and mine wasn’t. How could I remain so calm witnessing the death of a person? It didn’t have to be as extreme as your reaction; even just being sleepless with anxiety would be enough.”

The girl said nothing, but seemed to be listening closely.
“After your second murder, too, I was perfectly indifferent, feeling

no disgust or guilt. Instead, I noticed a separate, unknown emotion that I'd never experienced before. It must have overshadowed the usual negative impression I'd get from murder. By the time you committed your third murder, I think I'd almost realized what it was. But I didn't fully open my eyes to it until just this moment."

The girl sat up like she was shaking off numbness and looked at me with confusion.
"Er, what on earth are you talking about?"

What was I talking about?
I was talking about love.

"I think I'm in love with you."

Those words were enough to freeze the world over.
All the air fled out through cracks in the room, leaving the silence of a vacuum.

"...Um?", she finally spoke after a long silence.
"I know I have no right to such a thing. And I know I'm the person least suited to be feeling this way in the whole world. It's impudent, even. After all, I'm the one who took your life. But I'm saying this with all that in mind: *It seems that I'm in love with you."*

"I don't get it." She lowered and shook her head repeatedly. "Are you sleepwalking?"
"You have it backwards. I've been sleepwalking for 22 years. And I just now woke up. A little late, I know."

“I don’t understand a single thing about this. Why would you feel compelled to love me?”

“When you first killed someone in front of me,” I began, “when your blouse was stained with blood splatter, and you looked down on the corpse, gripping your deadly scissors, I looked at you and thought, “She’s beautiful.” ...At first, I didn’t even pay any attention to the fact I had that feeling. But now I realize it may have been one of the greatest moments of my entire life. It was my first ever experience falling for someone, actually. I, who’d seemingly given up on praying and hoping for anything so long ago, thought, “I want to experience that moment again.” That was how impressively beautiful the sight of you taking revenge was.”

“*Please* don’t just make things up.” The girl threw a pillow at me, but I blocked it and dropped it on the floor.
“You’re trying to get in my good books like *this?* I won’t be fooled,” she said with a glare. “I don’t like it. This method of yours is my least favorite of all.”
“I’m not lying. I know you won’t believe it. I’m probably the most bewildered one here.”
“I don’t want to hear it.”

The girl covered her ears and closed her eyes. I grabbed her wrists and pulled them away.
We met eyes at close range. A beat later, she averted her gaze downward.

“Listen, I’ll say it again,” I sighed. “You’re beautiful when you’re

taking revenge. So please, don't say that it's meaningless. Don't settle for that common, ready-made conclusion. At least to me, it's meaningful. In terms of beauty, it's more valuable than anything. So I'm praying you can get revenge on at least one more person. Even if I might be included in it."

Her hand brushed me away, and she forcefully pushed me in the chest. I fell onto the ground.
Of course she'd react this way, I thought, staring at the ceiling. What person could just accept being told "I've fallen for you" from the person who killed them?

In fact, I hadn't intended to say so much. I just wanted to leave it at "I sympathized with your revenge, and I was right to do so, so I don't want you to stop here."
What the hell was I saying, "it seems that I'm in love with you"? I'd never properly felt such feelings in my life - and directing them at a cowardly killer five or six years my younger? Was I just experiencing Stockholm syndrome?

My sigh touched the girl's hand, outstretched toward me.
I timidly reached for it, and she grabbed it firmly and pulled me up.
Something like this had happened before, I recalled. It was raining terribly then.

There was a long silence, with her still holding my hand. Her expression said "What am I doing?" Staring at our hands, she seemed to be deep in thought about the significance of her subconscious action.

Suddenly, her fingers stopped holding on, and she quickly pulled her hand away.

“Hurry up and get ready,” she told me. “We might be able to make the last train if we’re quick.”
I was stunned, and she looked at me smugly.
“What’s wrong? You like me *when I’m taking beautiful revenge*, don’t you?”
“...Yeah, that’s it,” I replied at length.

“That’s hard for me to understand,” she said with a sneer. “Being liked by you of all people doesn’t give me any joy.”
“I don’t care. You don’t have anyone but me to rely on, so I know I’ll be able to accompany you no matter how much you don’t like it.”
“Exactly. I’m very displeased.”
She stepped on my foot. But not forcefully enough to be painful, and as we were both barefoot, the smooth touching sensation was pleasant; it almost resembled something an animal would do as a display of affection toward others.

It was freezing outside, so we left wearing winter coats. Under the apartment overhang was parked a rusty bicycle that probably belonged to some tenant. I borrowed it without permission, had the girl sit on the luggage carrier, and rode out of the saddle to the station.
My hands on the handlebars were quickly chilled, my eyes hurt in the dry wind, and the wounds on my pinky ached in the cold air.

After climbing a long hill, there was a thin downward slope leading

to the station. The screeching sound of brakes echoed through the sleepy residential street.

Probably feeling a sense of peril from the increased speed, the girl clung to my back. If only for that reason, I wished that slope could go on forever.

# Chapter 8: Her Revenge

To get straight to the point, we proceeded to take the lives of seventeen people all told, including the first three.

The fourth victim was the girl's former homeroom teacher. After killing the man who, now in his sixties, had been battling with stomach cancer, she stated "Let's take this as far as we can go."
And so she added on thirteen more people she had deep grudges against who weren't part of the original plan.

As far as relationships, the breakdown went like this: seven were middle-school acquaintances, four were high-school acquaintances, two were teachers, and there were four "other"s.
The gender statistics: eleven women, six men. How they were killed: eight died immediately, four ran, two tried to talk it out, three resisted. Those were the final results.

Not everything went exactly to plan. In fact, we failed many, many times. In getting to the seventeenth murder, our targets ran five times, the police arrested us four times, and we suffered major wounds twice.
However, the girl "nullified" it all from happening. No, we didn't play fair at all. We abandoned all responsibility and had everything our way.

It may seem like I'm just laying out numbers here. But if you talked to me right after I'd finished helping with the seventeenth murder, that's just how I'd describe it. By about the fourth or fifth, each of

the victims were just numbers to me.
That's not to say none of the victims left any impression on me. Still, it wasn't who was being killed that was important to me, but the girl's every action in carrying it out.
The more deeply-rooted her anger, the more blood that spilled, the greater her reluctance, the most radiant her revenge was. That beauty alone didn't grow stale no matter how many times I saw it.

Once the eleventh victim was made deceased, the supposed time limit on the accident's postponement, the ten days, had already passed.
And on the fifteenth day, when all seventeen were dead, the effect seemed to somehow hang on.
Even the girl found it odd. I considered that while continuing her revenge, a strong desire to not die just yet arose that prolonged the postponement.

After completing the seventeenth murder amid a thicket red with maple trees, the girl took my hands and we spun around in the falling leaves, like dolls in a mechanical clock.
When I saw her innocent smile, I felt like I finally understood the greatness of having accomplishing something.

And when the postponement came to an end, that smile would be lost forever.
I thought it such a horrible loss, as horrible as the world losing one of its colors.

I'd done something there was no taking back.

By this time, I could feel such a pain in my chest at last.

Once the girl was done expressing her endless joy, she came back to her senses and let go of my hands awkwardly.
“You’re just the only one I have to share my happiness with, you see...”, she insisted.
“I feel lucky for that,” I replied. “That makes seventeen, right?”
“Yes. All that’s left is you.”

Dry leaves piled on the seventeenth corpse. The tall, large-nosed woman who had minutes ago been breathing was one of those who had joined the girl’s sister in abusing her.
We’d tailed her on her way home from work and spoken to her once she was alone. She appeared to not remember the girl she had once tormented, but the moment she pulled out the scissors, the woman sensed danger and fled.
At first, this led me to think she might be troublesome to deal with, but that she chose to escape into a thicket was nothing short of idiotic. We could easily focus on her murder without worry of being seen.

One thing that disappointed me was how the girl, quickly becoming practiced in murder, came to no longer bathe in bloodspray or meet significant resistance.
While her swift movements and her pinpoint accuracy with the scissors were beautiful, it was a little sad no longer seeing her get bloody and weary.

“Once I’m out of targets to take revenge on, I doubt I’ll have a very

strong will to keep my postponement going," the girl remarked. "In essence, your death will mean mine."
"When are you doing it?"
"I'd better not delay it too long. ...I'll have revenge on you tomorrow. That will put an end to it all."
"I see."

I squinted my eyes as the sunlight came from the west through the trees. The whole thicket was a shade of red that felt like the end of the world.
And indeed, for the girl, the end of the world was nearing.

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It was our final dinner together. I suggested having a meal at a fancy restaurant suitable for a day of celebration, but she promptly denied.
"I hate formal places, and I don't know anything about manners," explained the girl. "I don't want to be so nervous for our last meal that I can't taste the food."

She was exactly right. So in the end, we ordered steak at our usual family restaurant and toasted with soft-drink-like wine.
Perhaps because of her mature expression, as long as she wore the right clothes, one could easily see her as a college student, so the waiter didn't say anything about her being old enough to drink.

While picking at a montblanc at dessert, the girl informed me "I've never eaten a montblanc before now."

“Your thoughts?”
She made a grim face. “I didn’t want to learn this late in the game that there was something so delicious in the world.”
“I know how you feel. I wish I didn’t learn so late how fun it was to eat with a girl I like.”
She gently kicked my shin as if to rebuke me. But I knew from my fifteen days of experience that she wasn’t angry, she just came to seek awkward contact when she was drunk.

“Well, lucky you, you’ll be able to forget once my postponement ends.”
“I didn’t say I wanted to forget. Just wanted to know sooner.”
“And that’s what you get for driving drunk. You idiot.”
“Right you are,” I nodded.

Looking displeased, the girl put her elbows on the table and pointlessly swirled her wine glass.
“The fun of buying clothes, the fun of getting my hair cut, the fun of going to an amusement center, the fun of drinking, the fun of playing piano all day - I never wanted to know any of it.”
“Right, keep on getting angrier at me. That grudge is what you’re going to kill me with tomorrow.”
“...Don’t worry. I will carry out my revenge.” She took a swig of wine and slowly gulped it down. “Sweet talk all you like, you’re the one who ended my life. None of the things you’ve done for me will cover that up.”
“Fine by me.”

The time for worrying had passed days ago. Now I was just looking

forward to the moment she stabbed me with her scissors.
It was sad to imagine being stabbed by the person I loved, but it wasn't so bad considering that regardless of why, I would temporarily be the only thing on her mind.

The reason I was content with being killed wasn't because I saw it as atonement for killing her, nor did I want to take responsibility for my assistance in many murders.
I just wanted her to successfully take revenge on as many people as she could, and offered myself to be the last.

And, strictly speaking, I wouldn't die. I'd only temporarily die for the duration of the postponement's effect.
In the main timeline - not quite an accurate description either, but being commonly used in movies and books, it stuck with me - the girl was already dead, so no "cat" or its "claws" existed to kill me.
As long as that other me didn't commit suicide, I would get to keep living.

However, the one who would keep living was one who would never know the girl while she still lived.
That was my punishment for one accidental death and assisting in seventeen intentional ones, I insolently supposed.

"I just have one question..."
"Yes?", she replied, slightly tilting her head.
"If our meeting hadn't been the way it was, what do you think would have happened?"
"...Who knows. It's pointless to consider."

I couldn’t stop myself from imagining, though. What if I hadn’t run her over?

I rewinded back to that night. After buying beer at the supermarket, drinking it, and starting to drive, a slip of the wheel would drive me into the gutter, and I wouldn’t be able to get the car out.
I didn’t have my cellphone either, so I would just have to wait in the rain for a friendly helper to drive by.

Then the girl would appear. Why was a high schooler walking around at this hour, way out here, without an umbrella, all by herself?
Though finding it strange, I would ask her, “Hey, can I borrow your cellphone? My car’s stuck, as you can see.” She’d shake her head; “I don’t have a cellphone.” “Oh, too bad... Say, aren’t you cold?” “I am.” “Do you want to warm up in my car?” “No. That’s very suspicious.” “Personally, I think you’re pretty suspicious, walking around on an empty road in the dead of night without an umbrella. Don’t worry, I won’t do anything weird. Suspicious persons like us should get along, right?” The girl would hesitate, then wordlessly get in the passenger’s seat, and we’d both sleep.

We’d wake up to the morning sunlight. A truck would be honking its horn. It would tow the car out of the ditch. We’d thank the truck driver.
“Now, I should get you home. Or would school be better?” “I won’t be able to make it now. Because of you.” “I see. I guess I did a bad thing.” “Since I’ve given up on school now, please just drive around

at random.” “A joyride, you say?” “Please just drive around at random.”

After joyriding around rural roads all day, I’d part with the girl. What a strange day, I’d chuckle.
A few days later, she and I would happen to meet again. I’d stop the car, and she’d wordlessly get in instead of going to school.
“Well, how should we waste today?” “Please just drive around at random, mister kidnapper.” “Kidnapper?” “Stranger, then.” “Nah, I think kidnapper is better.” “Isn’t it?”

Then we’d come to meet almost weekly. Having found a wonderful means of recreation, we’d help each other rehabilitate from our ills. Years would pass, and the girl would push through high school to graduation, and I’d be reintegrated into society and work part-time jobs.
Even then, we’d go driving every Friday night. “You’re late, mister kidnapper.” “Sorry about that. Let’s go.”

What an absurd, ideal relationship. But even if we had met in such a way, while I could have possibly gotten close with her, I certainly wouldn’t fall in love.
By going along with her revenge, I felt I came to deeply understand her. That could have been a biased impression, however.

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That night, I woke up from a pressure on my lower stomach. Someone was straddling over me. My five senses, sleepy and

dulled, came back one at a time.
First was hearing. I heard rain falling on the roof. Next was touch. I felt hardness with my back and the back of my head; I'd slipped off the sofa and was sleeping on the floor.

Then, something sharp was thrust at my neck. I didn't even have to think to realize that it was the girl's dressmaking scissors.
When she said "tomorrow," she had apparently meant the moment the date changed over.

My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. The girl was not in her evening wear, but had changed into her usual uniform.
As soon as I realized that, I felt the reality that yes, this was the end. I felt everything was going back to normal.

"Are you awake?", the girl asked weakly.
"Yeah," I responded.
I didn't close my eyes. I wanted to see how she carried out her revenge to my very last.

I couldn't make out her expression in the dark. But her breathing and her tone told me she probably wasn't trembling with delight, nor was her face contorted with rage.
"I'm going to ask you some questions," she told me. "As a last confirmation."

---

A sudden wind blew, shaking the whole apartment.

She asked her first question.
“You assisted me over these fifteen days to atone for your actions. Is that right?”
“More or less,” I answered. “Though by doing that, I just added to my crimes.”

“You claimed you fell in love with the sight of me taking revenge. Is that true?”
“It is. I doubt I can make you believe it, but...”
“I’m not looking for anything but “yes” or “no,”” she interrupted. “You want me to kill you because, in accordance with your objective of atoning, you want me to get revenge on as many people as I can. Correct?”
“Right.” Strictly speaking, I didn’t want to die, but if those were my only two options, then it was closer to a yes.
“I see.” She seemed to accept my answers.

I mistakenly believed that these questions she was asking me were to assure herself that I actually sought the conclusion we were about to arrive at, justifying her murder.
I thought that the more I said “yes,” the more it would push her to commence with her revenge.

The questioning came to an end. My heart raced; it was happening. My mind was clear, and the attunement of my senses rapidly escalated. I even felt the slight trembling of the girl’s emotions via the end of her scissors. Slowly but surely, that hesitation went away.

I could tell her conviction was building. The scissor point advanced, albeit only millimeters. The stimulus to my pain receptors brought my attentiveness to its maximum.

The fear of death and the anticipation of beauty melted together like a drug filling my brain, causing a flood, wrapping me in an aimless ecstasy that made me want to shout.
My body shivered to the core. That's it, pierce it right through, I cheered. Put an end to all of it with those scissors. Deal the finishing blow to this walking corpse who'd deserved death for twenty-two years.

It was unfortunate that I couldn't see her expression in the dark. Would she be joyful as blood spewed out my neck into her face? Or angry? Or sad? Or hollow? Or perhaps she'd be completely lacking in -

"I can certainly understand your thinking," the girl said.
"That's why I won't kill you. *I refuse killing you."*
She took the scissors away from my neck.

I didn't understand what was happening.
"Hey, what's this? Are you really losing your nerve now?", I asked provocatively. But the girl heeded it not, and threw the scissors onto the bed.
"It doesn't exactly constitute revenge if I kill someone so desperate to be killed, does it?", she supposed, still sitting over me. "I won't grant your one and greatest wish. ...That is my revenge."

By then, I realized what she meant by “last confirmation.”
She wasn’t trying to ascertain whether her murder would be justified, but how meaningless it would be to murder me.

“...So if this fulfills your revenge,” I thought, “why hasn’t your postponement ended?”
“It simply hasn’t sunk in yet. No need to worry; I will die. It shouldn’t be long before the remnants of my will burn out.”

The girl stood up drearily, straightened her blazer’s sleeves and the creases on her skirt, and walked away from me toward the front door.
I wanted to get up and chase after her, but my legs wouldn’t move. I could only lie on the floor and watch her go.

As the girl reached the door, she remembered something and came to a stop. She turned around and walked back.

“There is one thing I need to thank you for,” she nearly whispered. “Despite all the wounds on my body, you called me “beautiful.” I don’t know how serious you were, but... it still made me very happy.”

She got on her knees next to me and covered my eyes with her hand. With the other hand, she held my chin.
Her soft hair brushed on my neck. As if giving me mouth-to-mouth, her lips gently encompassed mine.

I don’t know how long the moment lasted.

Our lips parted, and she took away her blindfolding arm and left the room.
Instead of a goodbye, she parted with “I’m sorry.”

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For the first time in ten days, I lay down on an empty bed and closed my eyes.
Fumbling around, I grabbed the scissors the girl threw aside. I put the point under my chin and breathed steadily.
I didn’t need to look into any proper method. I knew what to stab and how, I knew how long it would then take to die - after she’d showed me ad nauseam, I knew.

My beating pulse felt the blade. My mind was calmed by that fixed rhythm. I suddenly recalled hearing that when people died, their hearing remained to the very end. The other senses would die off, but hearing would hold on until just before death.
If I stabbed my own artery now, my senses would fade, and I’d die hearing nothing but the sound of raindrops.

I temporarily put down the scissors and reached for the CD player. I wanted to at least decide the sound that accompanied the end of my life.
Putting on an unfittingly noisy song seemed more suitable for my death than a sad song that lamented it.
I put The Libertines’ Can’t Stand Me Now on full blast, then threw myself on the bed again and grabbed the scissors.

Alas, I listened to three songs just sitting there. I hadn't expected myself to start *enjoying* the music.
Come on, get a hold of yourself. You're going to go through the whole album at this rate. And then what? "Next album?"

Fine, the next song. Once the next song is over, I'll do away with this ridiculous life of mine.

But as the fourth song was seconds from ending, there was a knock on the front door.
Ignoring it to focus on the music, I heard it being busted open. I hid the scissors under the pillow and turned on the light.

The art student, entering without permission, hit stop on the CD player.
"You're a neighborhood nuisance."
"Just different tastes," I joked. "So did you bring a CD to replace mine with?"

The art student looked around the room and asked, "Where's that girl?"
"She left. Just a while ago."
"In the rain?"
"Yeah. I exhausted her good graces."
"Huh. That's a shame."

She took out a cigarette and lit it, offering me one as well. I took it and put it in my mouth, and she lit it for me.
It had an order of magnitude more tar than I was used to, almost

like the ones Shindo used to smoke, so I nearly started to choke. Her lungs must have been pitch black.

“Where’s the ashtray?”, she asked.
“The empty can.” I pointed to the table.
After finishing her first cigarette, she started on another without a moment’s delay.

She must come here with something to say, I supposed. Being upset about the noise was just an excuse.
I think she’d told me that once. That she was horribly bad at saying what she really thought.
So she was probably in deep thought now, because she wanted to say something important to me.

Upon finishing three cigarettes, she finally spoke.
“If I were a good friend of yours, I’d probably say you should go after her right now. “Or else you’ll regret it your whole life,” or something. But since I’m such a sly and clever woman, I won’t say that.”
“Why not?”
“Hmm. Why not, indeed?”
Without any connecting logic, she said over her cigarette, “Winter’s coming soon.”

“You know, I was born in the south. Even when it snowed there, it was rare that it ever stayed to the next day. So I was astonished when winter first came for me here. Once the snow piles up, you don’t see the ground again until spring. And thanks to this image of

snow as this light and fluffy pure-white stuff, the heaviness of snow piles, the dread of walking on icy roads, how snow looks like volcanic rock when it's exposed to exhaust fumes, and so on... it was a little disappointing."

I didn't find myself thinking "what is she going on about now?"
This was just the awkward girl's best way of expressing herself.

"But even so, when it snows a lot at night, and a plow wakes me up in the morning, and I open my fogged-up window to look at the street, it's a sight to see every time. Like the world got a fresh coat of white. And on the other hand, when I get back home at night shivering, it's also great to have a warm cup of sugar-loaded coffee."

She paused there.

"...That's all I'll say. If you still want to go see that reaper, I won't stop you."
"Right. Thank you."
"Seriously, between you and Shindo, why do all the guys I get friendly with go away so quick?"
"I guess only people who start thinking about dying understand your charm."

"That doesn't make me very happy," she laughed with confliction. "Hey, I've always wanted to ask. Did you never so much as hold my hand because you just didn't have any interest in me? Or was that out of courtesy to dear departed Shindo?"

“I wonder. I don’t really know myself. Maybe I resigned myself to never beating him from the start.”
“...Thanks, that’s an answer that does make me happy. I think I feel a little better.”

She held out her left hand. Probably not her right because she was wary of my injury.
“Will you at least give me a handshake this last time?”

“Sure, gladly.” I held out my left hand. “Goodbye, uh...”
“Saegusa,” she told me, grabbing it. “Shiori Saegusa. First time properly using my name, eh, Mizuho Yugami? I like those kinds of non-committal relationships.”
“Thanks for everything, miss Saegusa. I found our relationship pretty comfortable, too.”

She readily let go of my hand. I didn’t want to prolong it either, and turned my back to her.
I buttoned up my coat, tied my boots tight, and opened the door holding an umbrella.

“I’ll be lonely with you gone,” I heard miss Saegusa remark from behind me.

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The traditional tactic would be to go around to places where I thought the girl might have gone.
But there was no need. I happened to know where she was headed.

She'd left me a few clues.
I thought about them in the order they occurred to me.

The first clue, I found when I bought tickets to get on the train. My wallet had been tampered with; the cards were arranged differently. I didn't even need to ponder whether it was the girl's doing.

My first thought was that she'd taken just enough money from me to spend during her remaining time. But checking carefully, I found not a single yen missing, and my ATM and credit cards were untouched.
After considering several possibilities, I decided on this: she was looking for something I possessed, and checked my wallet because it was likely to be there.

The second clue was the "I'm sorry" she left me with. An apology directed at the person who killed her.

What was that an apology for? She'd clearly explained the "thank you" just before it: "Despite all the wounds on my body, you called me "beautiful." I don't know how serious you were, but... it still made me very happy."
But no explanation for the "sorry." There was no way she just didn't think it was worth explaining. After all, I was racking my brain trying to figure it out.
Maybe she had a reason for not explaining it, yet at least wanted her feelings to be known before she went. So it probably didn't just stop at "I'm sorry."

The third clue was back four days ago. While the girl was showering, I thought I'd continue writing my "unsent letter" to Kiriko, so I opened the headboard cupboard, but the partially-written letter was gone.

I didn't pay it much mind then, but - having no doubt in my mind the girl had read it - why didn't she put it back where it was?
In my room, so utterly bare as to lose the feeling of being "orderly," losing something was simply impossible. And yet I never saw that stationery since.
Unless she meant to tease me and hid it in a CD case or between books, or threw it in the trash, only one possibility remained: She still had the letter.

After thinking this far, I looked back on all the days since meeting her. It was a simple puzzle.
*My memories were distorted.*

Why did she hate her surname of "Akazuki"? Why were her "classmates" a mix of high schoolers and college students?
And as I'd wondered from the start, why was she walking alone without an umbrella in that desolate place the day I ran her over?
But really, why had I taken so long to notice something so simple?

Some of the clues, whether consciously or not, were left behind by the girl's own hand.
She should have been able to hide it if she wanted to, but she left evidence of having gone through my wallet. She said "I'm sorry" as

she left.
She'd left just one string leading to the truth.

If miss Saegusa hadn't knocked on the door then, I would have plunged the scissors into my throat without ever knowing. I needed to thank her. In fact, she'd helped me time and time again.
But I didn't regret how we ended up parting. That anticlimactic end was a perfect fit for our relationship, I'm sure.

Having no car, I took one train and three buses to my destination.
The third bus got stuck in traffic on the way. There'd been an accident in the rain, and I saw fire trucks and police cars going down the opposite lane.
I told the driver I was in a hurry, paid the fare, got off there, and walked alongside the row of congested cars.

At the bottom of a low slope, there was a flooded area spanning several hundred meters, and the water went up to my knees at its deepest part.
At this point, long socks wouldn't be any help. My tightly-laced boots filled with water regardless. My wet clothes stole away my body heat.
The cold and the atmosphere made my wounded pinky begin to ache. And thanks to the side wind, the umbrella was little more than a consolation.

Soon a strong wind came, and as I grabbed the handle of the umbrella tightly, its skeleton broke to pieces.
Now rendered useless, I tossed it to the side of the road and walked

through the rain so severe that I could barely keep my eyes open.

After walking about twenty minutes, I finally escaped the flooded area. Emergency vehicles surrounded an overturned mid-sized truck and a highly-damaged station wagon.
Every turn of the sirens illuminated the raindrops and the wet ground, turning the whole area red. Car horns echoed from the direction of the traffic jam.

As I turned the corner, a high schooler riding a bicycle holding an umbrella in one hand nearly ran me over. He noticed me just in time and hit the brakes, then the tires slipped, making him and the bike fall over.
I asked if he was okay, but he ignored me and pedaled away. After turning to watch him go, I went back to walking.

I knew exactly how much longer I'd need to walk to reach the girl.
Because this was the town where I was born.

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The whole park was flooded, glittering from the morning sunlight peeking between the clouds. I could see just a single small wooden bench, appearing to float on the water.
The girl was sitting there. Naturally, she was soaked. She was wearing the knit nylon jacket I loaned her on top of her uniform. A broken umbrella leaned against the back of the bench.

I trudged through the puddles to approach her from behind and

covered her eyes with my hands.
“Who is it?”, I asked.
“...Don’t treat me like a child.”

She grabbed my hands and pulled them down to around her solar plexus. I fell forward and assumed the stance of hugging her from behind.
She let go after a few seconds, but I was fond of the position and kept it.

“This brings back memories,” I told her. “On the day of the accident, I sat in the bench you’re sitting in now all day, pelted by the rain. I was trying to rendezvous with someone. ...No, that’s not the right way to put it. I was just one-sidedly waiting for Kiriko to come.”
“What are you talking about?”
I knew she was playing dumb. So I just kept talking.

“In sixth grade, because of my dad’s job, I had to change schools. On my last day at my old school, I was about to head home feeling all lonely when a girl talked to me. She was Kiriko Hizumi. Though we’d almost never talked before, as we were about to part, she told me she wanted us to be penpals. I suppose anyone would have done the job for her; she just needed someone far away to send letters to. And I’d merely found her request hard to turn down - at first, I wasn’t actually that into the idea.

“...But as we went on writing each other, I realized our thoughts were almost frighteningly similar. We found agreement in everything we talked about. She’d understand feelings which I

thought impossible to convey to anyone, in exactly the way I intended them to be understood. It didn't take long before our correspondence, started so unassumingly, became something for me to live for."

Her body was cold. Because she'd been waiting in the rain for me, for who knows how many hours. Her face was pale, and her breathing quivered.

"One day, five years into our correspondence, Kiriko wrote that she wanted us to meet and talk in person. I was glad. She wanted to know more about me, and wanted me to know more about her. That fact, at least, really filled me with joy."
"...But you didn't go to meet her," she said. "Isn't that right?"

"Exactly. There was no way I could go meet Kiriko. I don't remember the exact time, but shortly after entering middle school, I started to lie in my letters. And not just one or two little white lies. My life was miserable then, not to mention insipid. I didn't want to write things just as they were and disappoint Kiriko, or get her pity. So I faked having a perfectly healthy and fulfilling life. If I hadn't, I thought our correspondence would have quickly ended."

As I explained this, I began to ask myself if this would have really been the case. Would writing letters about my lonely life at a middle school where I just couldn't fit in really be reason to stop being penpals?
I would never know now.

“But that desperate effort came to be my downfall. The girl who I trusted most in the whole world told me she wanted to meet in person, and yet if I responded to her plea, all of the lies I’d told her would go to ruin. I knew Kiriko would hate me if she knew what kind of person I was underneath my cover of lies. She’d scorn me the moment she found out I’d written falsehoods to her all those years. So regretfully, I gave up on meeting Kiriko. I never replied to her letters again, either. I didn’t know what to write. That’s how our relationship ended. ...Of course, giving up on a five-year habit was hard. Refusing to let go, I still wrote letters to console myself, with no intention of mailing them. I slowly piled up letters that no one would read.”

I took my arms off from around her and went around the bench to sit next to her.
She took something out of her bag and handed it to me. “I’ll give this back.”
It was the unsent letter I wrote to Kiriko. So she did have it.

“From what I’ve heard thus far,” she mused, “your story about sitting on this bench the day of the accident, waiting for miss Kiriko, doesn’t sound logical.”

“My friend’s death is what set things off. We knew each other since high school. He was a guy I could trust, so I ended up telling him about how I’d lied and lied to my penpal, then stopped replying to her when I was about to be found out. Then about a month before he died, he told me, “You should go meet Kiriko Hizumi.” He had no doubt it’d be a positive thing for my life. And it was rare for him to

suggest something to me like that.”

Yes, Shindo always hated giving people advice or listening to their troubles. Similarly, he hated being given advice or asking others to listen to his troubles.
He hated the tendency of favorably accepting anything as long as it was done in good will, even if it lacked prudence or judgement. That was taking a huge amount of responsibility, and so long as he lacked the confidence that he could handle the issue, he felt he shouldn’t say a word about other people’s lives - that was Shindo’s view.

So for him to give me some real advice worth calling advice, he must have been pretty serious about it, by his standards.

“So I decided I’d send a letter for the first time in five years. I wrote that if she was willing to forgive me, she should come meet me in the park near the elementary school we used to go to.”

I raised one of my legs to cross them, which caused a ripple in the puddle, making the blue sky shimmer at our feet.
The desolate tree branches and sky as cloudless as if it’d given up on everything made me feel that winter was approaching fast.

“I waited all day, but Kiriko never came to the park. It wasn’t unreasonable. I’d completely ignored the letters she kept sending after I stopped replying; suddenly saying “I want to apologize” only after my friend died was really pushing my luck. I knew she must not have needed me anymore, which made me miserable. So I

escaped into alcohol. I bought whiskey from the store on my way back from the park, and just started driving right after drinking it. And then, I ran you over."

I took out a cigarette and my lighter from my pocket. The oil lighter lit without issue, but the wet cigarette had a terribly bitter taste.

"I see. I more or less understand it now," the girl said.
"That's it for my story. Now it's your turn."

She put her hands on her knees and stared deep in thought at the peeled bench seat.
"...Say, Mizuho." She used my name. "Do you know why miss Kiriko didn't come to this park on the day of the accident?"
"That's what I came to ask," I replied.

"What I think," she prefaced cautiously, "is that miss Kiriko did set out for the appointed place. However, it took her considerable time to work up the resolve to do so. This time, it was she who had a reason she couldn't go meet you. Indeed, she couldn't look you in the face. On the other hand, learning that after five years of silence, the person who she thought had long forgotten about her still wanted to see her, she must have been happy enough to cry. After weighing her options at length, miss Kiriko decided she would go meet mister Mizuho."

She seemed to be speaking in as indifferent a tone as she could manage. Like she was denying her words the chance to show emotion.

“However, her decision came a bit too late. She fled the house, still in her school uniform, past 7 PM on the promised day. On top of that, it was raining terribly, so the buses and trains weren’t properly functioning. Ultimately, it was around midnight that she reached her destination. Naturally, there was no one in the park. She sat on the bench, struck by the rain, and lamented her own foolishness. She finally understood just how much she had hoped to reunite with mister Mizuho. Why was she always making these mistakes? Why did she worry about useless things and neglect what was most important? Miss Kiriko, in a state of stupefaction, began to trudge back the way she had come.”

And I knew better than anyone what happened to Kiriko after that.
She and I had reunited in the worst possible way anyone could imagine.
What’s more, neither of us had even realized it.

“There’s one thing I don’t get,” I pondered. “What did you mean by “you couldn’t look me in the face?””
“...This isn’t the appropriate place to explain that.”

Kiriko put her hands on her knees and stood up laboriously. I did the same.

“Let’s go back to the apartment for now. We’ll take warm showers, put on dry clothes, eat tasty food, get some good sleep, and then go somewhere appropriate for talking about the truth.”
“All right.”

Kiriko and I barely talked on the way back.
We held each other's cold hands, and I walked slowly to match her pace.
There should have been so much to talk about, but upon actually reuniting, it seemed as if words weren't necessary. The all-understanding silence was comforting, and no one wanted to speed it up with excessive words.

After napping together for a few hours on the bed in the apartment, we took the rickety shuttle bus from the station to the "appropriate place," arriving as the sun was beginning to set.

It was an amusement park on top of a mountain. After buying tickets and passing through an entryway with a jacket-wearing rabbit doll, we were met with a faded fantasy spectacle.

Behind the stands and ticket booths, a merry-go-round, and a revolving swing, I could see such attractions as a giant Ferris wheel, a pendulum ride, and a roller coaster.
There was noise from the attractions all around me, and shrill voices yelling. Large speakers around the park played infinitely cheery big band music, and I heard the sound of an old photoplayer among the attractions.
Despite what a rainy day it was, there were huge crowds. It was about half-and-half between families and couples.

Kiriko looked at it all nostalgically, holding me by the hand.
I, too, walked through the amusement park I'd surely never visited

before with a sense of familiarity. Perhaps I have been here, I felt.

She came to a stop in front of the Ferris wheel.
After buying only the tickets we needed from an automated machine, we got onto the gondola.

As we looked down on the park, one of the lights shining in the darkness went out. I think it was a lamp near the fountain.
That was only the beginning; though it was certainly not yet closing time, lights continued dropping off one by one.

The park was disappearing. And at the same time, I felt something I'd lost inside me slowly returning.

The magic's fading, I realized.
The postponement of the accident was ending, and at the same time death came to Kiriko, everything she had postponed was going back to normal.

Nearly all the lights were gone. The once-flourishing amusement park was now an inky black sea.
When the gondola reached the top of the wheel, my memories returned.

# Chapter 9: Let There Be Love

My sister, with the pretext of having “ignored her” for not making eye contact when we passed in the hallway, dragged me by the hair to my room, opened the door, and shoved me in.
Enduring the pain in my elbow after being severely thrown into the hard floor, I looked up and saw the delinquents my sister brought along, joyfully shouting vulgar things at me.
The room had a sour smell, like a dump full of beer bottles and empty cans. I tried to run, but as I turned my heel, a droopy-eyed man missing front teeth kicked my shin, and I fell flat. They cackled.

Then began the usual festivities. I was to be their toy.
One filled a glass with whiskey to the brim and told me to drink it down straight. Naturally, I had no right to refuse, so I reluctantly reached for the glass.
Then a woman wearing so much perfume as to smell like a bug-infested plant proclaimed that time was up and winked at a man beside her. The man held my arms behind my back and forced my mouth open. The woman poured the whiskey in.

I knew from prior experience that if I stubbornly refused to drink this, a worse punishment would await. So I gave in, and gulped down the whiskey in my mouth.
I desperately tried to keep from howling from the burning sensation in my throat and the peculiar smell like mixing medicine, barrels, and wheat. The crowd jeered.

Somehow, I drank the entirety of the glass. Within ten seconds, I

felt severe nausea. Everything from my throat to my stomach burned, and my senses were muddled and spun, as if someone was grabbing hold of my head and shaking.
I was one step from acute alcohol poisoning. I heard an ominous noise nearby. “Okay, time for a second!” The woman pushed the glass in front of my face.

I already lacked the energy to run, and the hands binding me wouldn’t be shaken off no matter how much I resisted. The whiskey was poured in, and I began coughing horribly in the midst of it.
“Disgusting,” the man holding me said, releasing my arms and pushing me away. Having lost my sense of balance, I felt like I’d fly up to the ceiling and stick to it, but in reality only fell flat on the floor.

I crawled toward the door desperate to somehow escape, but someone grabbed my ankle and pulled me back.
My sister squatted next to me and said, “If you can last an hour without throwing up, I’ll let you go.” I was about to shake my head, knowing there was no possible way, but before I could, she punched me in the stomach. She hadn’t even intended to give me the chance.
I found myself puking up on the spot, and the crowd cheered.

A short and stout woman announced that I would be punished for losing the game, took out a taser, and turned it on.
The firecracker-like sparking sound made me cower. I knew the amount of pain it could induce far better than she did.

Immediately, she put the electrode to my neck, and a shriek that I couldn't imagine was my own came out my throat.
Finding it funny, she applied it in many other places, aiming for areas with thin skin. Again. And again. And again. And again.
As if to fill the gaps between the pains being inflicted upon me, the alcohol brought back more nausea. When I threw up again, the crowd booed, and I suffered a particularly long tasering for it.

And yet I didn't feel any suffering. That kind of thing wasn't enough to "undo."

Familiarity is a scary thing; I had become able to make it through such agony.
I emptied my head to prepare for any kind of attack, and packed it full of music instead. While they berated me, I focused on exactly recreating music in my mind to dull my other senses.

I'll go to the library tomorrow and stuff in lots more music, I decided.
The small, drab library that had been in the area for over three decades had little in the way of books, but was rich with music, and I almost daily listened to their selection in the listening corner.

At first, I enjoyed intense music that tried to blow my gloom away. But I soon found that the most effective thing for dealing with agony wasn't excellent lyrics or a snug melody, but "pure beauty," and so my tastes shifted toward calmer songs.
"Meaning" and "comfort" would eventually leave you behind. "Beauty" wouldn't snuggle with you, but it *would* stay in the same

place. Even if I didn't understand at first, it would wait there patiently until I arrived.

Pain lays waste to positive feelings, but you can't lose the feeling of regarding something beautiful as beautiful. In fact, pain just makes beauty more apparent. Anything for which this doesn't hold true is just an imitation of true beauty.
Merely-fun music, merely-interesting books, merely-deep paintings - they couldn't be relied upon in a pinch, so how valuable could they truly be?

As Pete Townshend said, "Rock and roll won't solve your problems, but it'll let you dance all over them."
Indeed, my problems *won't* be solved. That was the essence of my salvation. Any thought that had the prerequisite of solving all my problems, I didn't believe. If there was nothing to be done about anything, then nothing would be done about everything.
Forget about such "relief" as the ugly duckling becoming a beautiful swan. As I thought, the ugly duckling would have to become happy remaining ugly.

How long did it take? It could have been minutes, it could have been hours.
Either way, when I came to, my sister and her friends were gone. I'd made it through their torment yet another day. I was victorious.
I stood up and went to the kitchen to gargle two cups of water, then went to the toilet to throw up again. I stood in front of the sink to brush my teeth.

I looked terrible in the mirror. My eyes were congested and red, yet my face was pale, and my shirt had stains of whiskey, puke, and blood.
I wondered when I'd bled and checked myself for injuries, yet found none. But as I started to brush, I realized I'd bitten my cheek while being attacked with the taser. My toothbrush was soaked red.

It was 4 AM. I took aspirin and stomach medicine from the shelves in the living room, changed into bedwear, and lay down on my bed. No matter how much I was hurt, there was no changing that tomorrow would be an ordinary day of school. I had to get my body at least some rest.

I took the teddy bear from under my pillow and hugged it. Even I questioned such a method of consoling myself. It truly stunned me. But I supposed it might just continue this way. While I'd long sought a soft embrace, I knew that there was no person who would provide it to me.

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The public high school, having an isolated feeling from the thick trees around it, was not one I attended willingly.
I'd hoped to attend a local private school, but my mother insisted that women didn't need extensive schooling, and my stepfather claimed that no high school I went to would change anything, refusing to let me take entrance exams anywhere but the public institution a single bus ride from home.

Whenever the starting bell rang, it was ignored, and voices continued chattering around the classroom. The classes didn't test anything of worth, and by noon, a third of the students had left early.
There were hundreds of cigarette butts behind the gym, and about once a month, someone would get arrested or get pregnant and drop out; that was the sort of school it was.
But I told myself I had to be grateful I was going to high school at all. Some children don't even get a proper middle school education.

Noon classes began. The room was so noisy I couldn't make out anything the teacher was saying, so I started reading the textbook by myself when something hit me on my shoulder from behind.
A paper bag that still had a few things inside. A little bit of coffee flew out and stained my socks. There was laughter, but I didn't even turn around.
During class, they wouldn't do anything worse than this. If throwing a paper bag at me was all they'd do, I could ignore it and continue studying.

I suddenly looked up and made eye contact with the teacher. A young woman, in her late twenties. She must have seen the paper bag too, but she feigned ignorance.
But I didn't blame her for it. I similarly wouldn't do anything for her if she were to become a target of the students. We only looked out for ourselves.

After school, I headed directly for the city library. I wanted to listen to music, yes, but I also wanted to quickly get somewhere quiet and

sleep.
It was awkward using the library like a comics cafe, but I wasn't aware of anywhere else I could have a peaceful sleep.

At home, my father or sister could wake me up and beat me at any time, and in the classroom, if I carelessly nodded off on my desk, I could have my chair pulled out from under me or garbage dumped out on my head.
I couldn't sleep in such places, so I slept in the library. Luckily, the sorts of people who wanted to inflict harm on me didn't come near it. Plus, I could read books and even listen to music. A fantastic invention, libraries.

Sleep deprivation fundamentally weakens people. Just halving the amount of sleep would severely lower my resistance to things like physical pain, verbal vilification, and anxiety about the future.
If I yielded even once, it would take considerable time and effort to return to appearing tough as usual. No, if I wasn't careful, maybe I could never return to that.

I had to be strong and resilient. So keeping up with sleep was essential. Any day I couldn't get more than four hours of sleep at home, I slept at the library.
I wouldn't say the hard chair in the private study room was comfortable to sleep in, but it was the one and only place where I could belong. During the open hours of 9 AM to 6 PM.

After listening to some light music, I checked out John Irving's The Cider House Rules and read it. My drowsiness hit a peak after

reading just a few pages.
The time passed as quickly as if someone stole it away, and a librarian shook my shoulder to tell me that the library was closing for the night.
The alcohol from yesterday had finally left me, and my pain had settled. I bowed my head to her, put the book back on the shelf, and left the library.

It was completely dark when I went outside. In October, the sun began to set very early.
On my way home, the cold wind made me shiver, and I thought about the same thing I always did:

Will a letter come today?

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It had been a long five years since we became penpals. In that time, my surroundings changed greatly.
My father died of a stroke, and several months afterward, my mother married the man who was now my stepfather. My surname changed from “Hizumi” to “Akazuki,” and I gained a sister two years my elder.

The moment I saw the man that my mother told me she intended to marry, in the spring of my first year of middle school, I predicted that my life would be thoroughly destroyed, and thought to myself, “I’m doomed.”
Every element that made him up gave me a foreboding feeling.

While I couldn't quite express in words why I felt such ill omen, after 17 years of life, I didn't need to say "I suppose I'd call him a bad person" or "I suppose I'd call him a good person" - at a glance, he was *clearly* a bad person. That was what my subconscious accumulated knowledge told me.
Why had my mother chosen this plague-carrier, of all people?

Just as I predicted, my stepfather was an exemplary bringer of ills. He felt inferior about his social standing, and lept at the chance to beat others down in order to cover for it.
In addition, he was a coward, so he would only target those weaker than himself. He'd berate service workers for "hardly providing a service," explicitly asking their names to insult them; or when a car rear-ended him, he'd force the whole family to get down and apologize in the street.

Yet he honestly seemed to believe that such actions were "manly" and that he was doing them a service.
The most terribly worrying part was that my mother, at least, seemed to be taken by his idea of "manliness" driven by his own sense of inferiority. He was truly, truly beyond help.

As someone who thought this way, my stepfather believed that using violence to secure his position as the head of the family was an essential element of manliness.
What were the other elements? Beer, smoking, gambling. He revered them as symbols of masculinity. Perhaps he would have liked to add "women" to the list, but alas, no amount of work on his "manliness" would make any woman - my mother excluded - come

near him.

Perhaps aware of this himself, he would occasionally repeat, though no one had asked, something like this: “Loving my one and only wife makes me feel like I have something to live for. So while really, I’ve had countless opportunities to go after other women, I’m not interested at all.”
And of course, before these words were hardly out of his mouth, he’d beat my mother.
I tried to break up the violence many times, but my mother told me, “Kiriko, please don’t speak up. Things only get more complicated when you’re in the equation.”

After she told me that, I came to simply stand aside and watch.
In any event, it was my mother’s choice. All I could do was watch it unfold.

One day, when I was alone with her, I asked “Haven’t you thought of divorce?”
But she said such things as “I don’t want to trouble my parents,” and “I’m hopeless without a man,” even ending with “We all have our faults.”
A complete tour of all the words I didn’t want to hear, I thought.

---

My stepfather’s violence gradually came to also target me, his daughter-in-law. Well, it was the natural flow of things.
He’d beat me for the most trivial reasons, like getting home a little

bit late or leaving school early. His handiwork slowly escalated, until one day my drunk stepfather pushed me down the stairs.
It wasn't as serious as it could have been, as I wasn't hurt in any particularly bad spots, but that one occasion got my mother furious, and the next day she briefly hinted at the idea of divorce.

Yes, only hinted. Wary of her husband's anger, she was careful not to speak the word "divorce."
She simply said, "If you keep treating Kiriko and I like this, I might have to take some measures of my own."

And she wasn't allowed to say any more. My stepfather picked up a nearby glass and threw it at a window.
At the time, I was in my room reading a reference book. When I heard the sound of the window shattering, my pen stopped, and I hesitantly wondered if I should go check the living room.

Just then, the door slammed open and my stepfather came running in. I nearly shrieked, and I think I should have - I should have screamed as loud as I could.
Maybe then someone in the neighborhood would have heard and come running. ...I'm joking, of course.

My mother came in behind, sobbing "Stop this, she has nothing to do with this," but he beat me regardless. I fell out of my chair and hit the side of my head against the desk.
Yet I couldn't think much more than "Great, so he won't even let me study in peace." Like it or not, seeing domestic violence every day got me used to it.

But as he struck me a second time, a third, a fourth, a fifth, a chilling fear arose from my core. It was my first time experiencing it.
I had a sudden thought. What if this man doesn't know any limits?
I instantly began to cry, and my body trembled. Perhaps they were tears wept because I was already predicting the tragedy in the months to come.

My mother kept trying to grab my stepfather's hand, but with the sheer difference in strength, she was quickly brushed off.
"It's your fault," he said. "I'm not doing this because I want to. But if you're going to make a fool of me, I'm going to have to take it out on her too. It's all your fault..."

I had no idea what he was saying. But somehow I understood his reason for beating me, rather than my mother who his anger was directed at. This was more effective than targeting her directly.

I was beaten for nearly two hours straight. Just as he wanted it, my mother never spoke of divorce again.
As if taking a liking to it, it came to be that when I didn't listen to him, he beat my mother, and when she didn't listen to him, he beat me.

---

My one salvation was my correspondence with Mizuho. If there was any time in my life that could be praised, it was when I'd roped Mizuho into becoming my penpal.

I waited for my opportunity ever since that autumn day in sixth grade when our homeroom teacher told us he would be changing schools.
But being so cowardly, it was difficult to take that first step, and I ultimately wasn't able to bring up the topic of becoming penpals until his very last day.
If I hadn't squeezed out enough courage then, and hadn't ended up exchanging letters with Mizuho, I'd have nothing to live for and probably would have died at 13 or 14. So I praised my past self.

To be honest, the "correspondence" I speak of is probably slightly different from what most people would think.
In my letters, I didn't write tearfully to Mizuho about how I lived in fear of my stepfather, stepsister, and school to have him comfort me.
I did write things just as they happened for a few months after starting, but once my stepfather arrived and things changed completely, I started to lie about everything instead.

That isn't to say I didn't have any desire to complain and cry, and to have Mizuho console me. But I feared that myself changing would change him as well.
If I had written about my hardship exactly to the letter, Mizuho would come to worry for me and carefully choose inoffensive topics, no longer talking as much about the positive occurrences in his life.
Then our correspondence would be reduced to a written form of counseling.

I didn't want that. So I created a fictional "Kiriko Hizumi." My father being dead, my mother remarrying the worst human alive, being horribly bullied at school, I made not a peep about.
All that was for Kiriko Akazuki to deal with, and had nothing to do with Kiriko Hizumi. Kiriko Hizumi was a girl living a normal yet fulfilling life, who could also reflect upon the happiness she was blessed with.

I enjoyed briefly becoming her to write my letters. By the time I was writing a second sentence, I could fully assume the role of Kiriko Hizumi.
As small details that gave my lies a hint of truth piled up, I came to feel like I was living two lives simultaneously.

Ironically, my fictional life soon overtook my real one. If, for instance, I had written letters from the standpoints of both Kiriko Hizumi and Kiriko Akazuki, and asked strangers to guess which described an actual life, I would expect nine out of ten to pick Kiriko Hizumi.
That was the extent to which I delved into my fiction and out of my reality. Endless days of abuse. If there had been even the slightest change, it might have felt more real.

---

I loved Mizuho.

I did, though, feel it was strange to "love" someone who I hadn't met in five years simply because he and I got along well. What was I

doing falling for the recipient of my letters whose face I could hardly imagine anymore?
The possibility that because no one else would fill such a position, I had no other choices for love but him, was one I lacked enough evidence against to deny.
It could have also been because we really hadn't talked much at all outside of letters, so I was only seeing his good side.

Still, I was oddly convinced of it. Mizuho was the only one in the world I could feel this way about.
There was no basis, but there didn't have to be. I'd never wanted to be forcibly justifying or logically explaining my own feelings.
Falling in love shouldn't require explaining anything to others. If anyone does feel that such a thing is necessary, I suspect they view love as a means rather than an end.

My mind, ever eager to make itself difficult to save, decided to create an imaginary Mizuho based off his letters, handwriting, and stationery.

In my imagination, he had grown very tall after grade school, and now was about a head taller than me. A good height difference for hugging.
Despite the cheerful loquaciousness of his letters, I imagined that if we met in person, he'd be too shy to even look me in the eye and bad at enunciating. Occasionally, it would lead him to say startling things to me without hesitation.
Normally he had a somewhat gloomy expression, and his way of speaking could be called calm at best and indifferent at worst, but

his occasional smile was just as it was when he was 12.
It would completely take me by surprise as it appeared, that dizzyingly lovable smile.

That was the Mizuho I imagined. I was shocked to find when we later reunited how many of my predictions were spot-on, but that's for a bit later.

---

When I returned home, I didn't go to check the mailbox, but underneath an owl statue by the front door. I'd arranged with the friendly postman to have him put any letters sent by Mizuho Yugami there instead.
Of course, it wasn't the same delivery person every time, so some days a letter would end up directly in the mailbox.

I peered under the owl and saw that there was no letter. Sighing, I opened the front door. I quickly regretted it. I should have checked inside first.
My stepfather had just put down his briefcase, and was in the middle of taking off his shoes.

"I'm home," I meekly voiced. He quickly turned his back to me and stuffed something in his suit pocket.
I found myself strangely caught up on that action. It gave me a bad feeling.

"Hey," he replied. Definitely sounds awkward, I thought to myself.

Like how a guilty person would reply. My unease swelled.
I boldly asked, “Um, did you hide something just now?”
“...Hmm?”

His tone darkened instantly. He took an offensive stance, and took a quick breath as if to prepare to shout at any time.
But this told me without a doubt that he felt guilty about something. And it also no doubt had to do with the thing he hid in his pocket. Such a brazen man would have no other reason to hide mere mail.

“It’s something addressed to me,” he oppressively stated. “You’d better watch your mouth.”
Figuring I’d be given the runaround if I asked indirectly, I got straight to the point.
“In that case, can you show it to me? Just for a second.”

His face instantly showed a panicked expression. But just as quickly as it appeared, it changed to anger instead.
It was one of his creeds that victory in these situations went to the one who first got the upper hand and shouted out the other. And indeed, that was effective, when the other was someone weaker and with no ground on him.

“Who do you think you are?”, he growled, closing in on me. I smelled a greasy smell. He grabbed my collar and lightly smacked my cheek.
However, with this I was able to confirm there was an envelope poking slightly out of his pocket. From the gray, high-quality paper

and handwriting of the address, I recognized it as a letter from Mizuho.
He noticed where I was looking, let go of my collar, and thrust me away.
“Don’t push your luck,” he told me as he went up the stairs. I tried to chase after him, but my legs wouldn’t move. My body knew how pointless it was to resist that man.

I collapsed to the floor. He was the one person I didn’t want knowing about it.
He’d lock himself up in the study and read through that letter Mizuho wrote for me. And he’d chuckle about learning a new one of my weaknesses.

He was always that way. I don’t know if I’d call him a peeping tom, but my stepfather wanted to know all his family’s secrets. For being a champion of manliness, he seemed to considerably enjoy things in the realm of gossip.
Whenever my mother got a phone call, he’d have her report on what it was about. He opened up any and all mail that came in for himself. Whenever he had the chance, he’d sneak a peek at cellphones (though I wasn’t given one, so that wasn’t a danger I went through). And I’d seen him sneak into my room to fish through drawers more than twice.

And now this. I had to settle for him reading the letter. There would be nothing shameful written there.
Other than the fact that I’d been continuously lying, our correspondence was perfectly healthy. There was nothing to worry

about it being read.

What I was far more afraid of now was that my stepfather, to conceal the truth of having read a letter addressed to me, would dispose of the evidence somewhere like a train station or a convenience store trash can.
Just imagining it made my pulse pound. Those letters were my treasures. My creed. My life. Losing one was more painful than my body being burned alive.

When my stepfather went to work the next day, I abandoned all shame and honor and dug through the trash cans around the house. Then I took a flashlight and searched all the trash cans along his commute.
In the restroom of a convenience store next to his company, I found the crumpled gray envelope.
But the all-important contents were nowhere to be found.

If this were only a one-time occurrence, then I could accept it being lost. I could just write that I'd put it in my bag to read it elsewhere and lost it along the way.
But I was sure that after this event, my stepfather would be wary of the mailbox and the surrounding area.
And when he found a letter addressed to Kiriko Hizumi, he'd happily stuff it in his pocket, bask in his superiority as he read it in secret, then ball it up and discard it somewhere on his way to work.

Further correspondence may be difficult, I realized.

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Why couldn't I "undo" the event of my stepfather finding the letter?
I'm sure it must have had to do with the guilt I felt over continuing to lie to Mizuho.

This relationship is unhealthy, it should be terminated, and perhaps this incident would be a good chance to abandon it.
By feeling that way for even a second, my wish lost its purity and strength, and "postponement" of the event became very difficult.

---

The feeling that bad things always come at you all at once may be an illusion along the lines of "it always starts raining when I start washing my car."
But the same day I was in the depths of despair after being unable to find the letter, something even worse happened.

When I went to school at lunch and entered the classroom, a few girls grabbed me by the neck and dragged me behind the gym.
I wasn't particularly surprised, as I'd noticed they had their eyes on me for a while. It was akin to seeing a cloudy sky start to rain.

The degree to which my classmates detested me wasn't extremely severe or extremely weak, but just moderately right there in the middle.
I was strong enough to resist it, but not enough to fully defend

myself. And not weak enough to completely give in, but enough to give up on bettering the situation.
Whether it's sports, a board game, or bullying, it's most enjoyable to beat someone who's "strong yet weak."

Upon realizing that, while I had no way of making myself any stronger or weaker, just the feeling that I'd figured out the reason significantly lessened my worries.
That must be why people who lead miserable lives become more introspective, I mused.

After all six of the girls had beaten me up, they pushed me to the ground. My mouth was pried open, and a bucket of dirty water was poured in.
I didn't know where they got the water from, but it seemed to have just the same kind of impurity as the water used for end-of-the-day cleanup. People really enjoyed having me drink strange things, it seemed.

I tried holding my breath and refusing to gulp it down, but someone grabbed my neck and squeezed it, causing a considerable amount of the water to go down.
The mixed taste of detergent and dust filled my mouth and ran down from my throat to my stomach. I couldn't bear it and threw up. Gosh, I was throwing up all the time lately.

"Clean that up later," a classmate said with satisfaction, and they left. I went to a washing area and threw up more water, then washed my clothes and body.

My wet uniform dripped water, and enduring the gaze of passersby, I went down the hallway to my locker in front of the classroom. But when I opened it, my jersey wasn't there.
Suddenly, I noticed the faucet running at the sink a few meters away. Sure enough, my jersey was there, getting waterlogged.
Such intricacy. What had driven them to go this far?

I went to the infirmary, borrowed a change of clothes, and put my uniform and jersey in the dryer.
My eyes were starting to lose focus, and something inside me seemed about to break. But I just barely held my ground. By taking repeated deep breaths, I aired out my stagnant body.

They say suffering makes fools of people, but being abused by everyone was just making me empty.
So perhaps this shouldn't be called suffering, but emaciation. I was being worn down day by day.

---

After school, I stopped by the library, sat in the hard chair, and wrote a letter to Mizuho.
Just writing the sentence "I want to talk face to face" took twenty minutes. "Some things, I just can't bring myself to say in letters. I want us to look each other in the eyes and hear each other talk."

Communicating through letters had gotten difficult. I didn't have a cellphone. Even using the home phone was difficult with my family watching, and I didn't have the money to have satisfyingly long

conversations on a public phone.
But I still wanted to keep things going with him. Which meant we'd have to meet in person. I had no other choices. I decided I would meet Mizuho.

That said, it was a long shot. Mizuho would quickly see through the differences between the fictional Kiriko Hizumi and the real Kiriko Akazuki.
Maybe I could fool him if it were only a couple of hours, but if our relationship were going to continue outside of letters, I wouldn't be able to hide the truth forever.

When I reunited with Mizuho, I would have to confess my lies. How would he respond to that?
He was kind, so even if he learned he'd been deceived for five years, he wouldn't show his anger, I was sure. But no doubt he would be disappointed. I couldn't help but be afraid of that.

Or maybe I was being too optimistic. Just because I was indifferent didn't mean I could deem others to be the same way.
After all, I seemed to have some uncommon quality that made everyone everywhere hate me at all times. I needed to take that into account.

Perhaps the worst case scenario was Mizuho would scorn me for my lies, call me tactless, and disappear from my life.
No, maybe he'd never even accept my suggestion in the first place. It was possible he was friendly with me because it was via letters, and wasn't interested enough to care about meeting in person. I

could see him pinning me as an impudent girl.

I could “undo” those things. Because after the day I found the run-over corpse of a gray cat I’d adored at eight years old, I was a wizard. I became able to make events such that they never happened, for a fixed time.
However, if Mizuho showed his distaste for me, and I nullified it, I would retain the memory of him rejecting me. Would I be able to continue our correspondence with a straight face, knowing that?

When all hope is lost, what am I to do?
Simple. I would retreat into fantasy, as always. Something easy to imagine: a train. The time doesn’t matter, but let’s say it’s evening.

I’m at a railroad crossing. A small railroad crossing with no one around. Ding, ding, ding. The alarm starts to sound off. I watch for the right time and duck under the gate, then lie down on the track. My neck and my shins are positioned on the tops of the rails. After looking at the stars for a few seconds, I slowly close my eyes. I feel a vibration from the tracks. The sharp light from the headlights peeks under my eyelids. The brakes screech, but it’s already too late. My neck comes off in an instant.

That was my fantasy.
What a good world. So many easy and reliable ways to end a life. And that’s why I was able to live so intently.
“If you can’t stand this game anymore, you can just turn off the power. You have that right.”
Until the moment I well and truly couldn’t stand it, I would hold

tight to the controller to uncover all the details of this sick game.
Incidentally, in seventeen years of playtime, I did come to learn one thing: that it's pointless to hope for any kind of "creator's intent."

After napping until closing time, I mailed the letter in a round postbox installed near the entrance and left the library behind.
As I walked the residential streets filled with warm light, all the families seemed to be living in harmony. But I figured the reality couldn't be so, and they all had their own terrible problems to deal with.
At the very least, I wasn't hearing any shouting or screaming from their houses.

---

After waiting a week feeling like the girl in Please Mr. Postman, there was still no reply from Mizuho. I began to lose my mind, unable to stop imagining bad possibilities.
What if his reply was delayed because he was thinking about how to refuse me? Or was he simply busy with school and clubs? Maybe a reply had come, but my stepfather snatched it? Was he upset about how I hadn't touched upon anything he wrote in his last letter? What if something happened to him? Did I exhaust his good graces with my impudence? Would he never reply again? Had he long since seen through my lies?

I stared at myself in the mirror of the dim library bathroom. My eyes had heavy bags, and were muddled with black.
No one would be itching to meet such a ghastly girl, I thought.

Ten days passed. I began to consider the possibility of carrying out my railroad crossing fantasy.

Upon returning from the library, I saw the familiar postman arrive at my house and run off.
My heart pounding, I searched underneath the owl statue. But my despair only deepened. Just in case, I checked around the mailbox too, but of course, found nothing there either. I pathetically checked under the owl again. No.

I stood there. My hate for it all became unbearable. As I considered destroying this owl to distract myself at least somewhat, a voice came from behind.
I turned around and greeted the mailman; he had purposefully come back for me. The short man in his early forties kindly returned the greeting.
In his hand was a gray envelope with high-quality paper.

He whispered to me.
“I was here a moment ago and was about to put this under the owl as usual, but your father was just coming home. You want to avoid him seeing it, right?”

I was too grateful to say a word. Thank you, thank you. I deeply bowed to him again and again.
His sun-baked face distorted into a sorrowful smile. He must have been faintly aware of my situation. “I’m sorry I can’t do anything for you,” said his eyes.

So I replied in the same way. “You don’t need to worry about it. Besides, isn’t this all too common?”

Not wanting anyone to interrupt the moment, I went to the waiting area of a local bus station and opened the envelope.
My hands trembled. Just to be sure, I checked the address and sender again. Kiriko Hizumi. Mizuho Yugami. No mistaking it. As long as this wasn’t a wish-fulfilling illusion, this letter was written from Mizuho to me.

I took out the letter and slowly digested the words written there. A few seconds later, I leaned on the back of the bench and looked up at the stars.
I folded up the letter, put it back in the envelope, and held it over my heart. The sides of my mouth naturally lifted, a smile eking out. My breaths seemed a little warmer than usual.

“Mizuho,” I whispered.
The sound of that name was, for the moment, my entire life.

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There was an incident in which money was stolen from a student’s wallet, and having not been in the classroom at the time, I was the number one suspect.
Two teachers asked me in the staff room what I was doing then. I replied that I was drying my clothes in the infirmary after my classmates dirtied them, and the nurse should know that as well, so could they please confirm these things from the start?

There were less than thirty minutes until my meeting with Mizuho, so I was agitated and spoke harshly.

The teachers had their doubts. They knew the kind of treatment the students usually subjected me to, and began to question if I was getting payback. They deemed the infirmary business to be a blatant creation of an alibi.
“We won’t call the police, so just fess up now,” a math teacher butted in to say. My holding time kept being prolonged.

Once it was ten minutes past the arranged time, I slipped out of the staff room without warning. “Wait,” they shouted and grabbed my arm, but I shook it off and ran.
I ignored them shouting “Do you think you can run?” from behind me. By doing this, they’d obviously only be further convinced of my guilt. But did I care? It was neither here nor there.
As much as I rushed, the promised time of 5 PM had already passed. But maybe Mizuho would wait for me if it were only an hour, say.

I ran without regard for the people watching. Sweat ran down my forehead. My big toe ran up against my cheap loafers, peeling the skin. My heart shrieked in want of oxygen. My vision narrowed. But I just ran.

Mizuho had indicated a small train station, right around the middle of the line connecting our houses, as our rendezvous point.
Luckily, it was within walking distance of school. If I hurried, I could get there within thirty minutes.

More calamity awaited. Right after turning a corner, a bicycle flew out in front of me. We both went the same way to try and avoid each other and collided head-on.
My back hit the asphalt, and the impact left me unable to breathe. Clenching my teeth as I squatted on the ground, I waited for the pain to recede.
The high schooler riding the bike ran up and apologized furiously. I acted like it was nothing, stood up, said “Sorry, I’m in a hurry,” pushed him away, and started on my way again.
Suddenly, pain shot up my ankle, and I faltered.

I made an impudent request of the high schooler insistently apologizing to me.
“Um, don’t worry about the accident. Could you take me to the train station in exchange?”
He gladly accepted. I sat on the luggage carrier of the bicycle, and the boy wearing a knit blazer took me to the station.
Ultimately, I seemed to get there faster than I would have on foot. Luck hadn’t given up on me just yet.

On reaching the roundabout outside the station, I said “This is good enough,” got off the bicycle, and hurried to the building while holding my leg.
A clock standing out among shrubs showed it was ten minutes to 7 PM. A departure whistle echoed across the platform. The stopped train began to move.

I had a bad feeling.

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I stood alone underneath the flickering fluorescent lights. After watching the second hand of the clock complete three revolutions, I sat in one of the chairs, of which there were only six.
With my sweat dried, my body was cold, and there was a throbbing pain in my head. I took a paperback out of my bag and opened it on my lap.
I mechanically read the words, but caught none of their meaning. Still I continued to flip pages.

I wasn't expecting that if I waited like this, Mizuho would come running up to me out of breath.
I just needed some time to accept the fact that I'd wasted our one chance at reuniting.

"Did you not make the train?"
I turned and saw the boy who brought me here. I couldn't be bothered to explain the situation, so I nodded.
He lowered his head. "I'm really sorry. It's my fault."
I did the same. "No, there was no chance of me making it in the first place. In fact, you taking me on your bicycle got me here much faster than expected. Thank you very much."

The boy was about a head taller than me, and had sort of a melancholy air about him. He bought warm milk tea from a vending machine and offered it to me.
I thanked him and accepted it, used it to warm up my hands, and

slowly drank. Calming down caused the pain in my ankle to surmount, but compared to the wounds others inflicted with hostile intent, it was nothing.

I observed the boy again as he sat two seats away from me. I hadn't noticed before with my fixation on the rendezvous, but the uniform he wore seemed familiar. Yet I couldn't remember where I'd seen it.
A knit blazer and a gray necktie. It was different from the numerous uniforms I'd seen coming home from school, and it wasn't a uniform from any of the high schools I'd hoped to attend.

I took my time searching every nook and cranny of my memory. That was it. About two years ago, something had led me to use a computer at the library to research a certain high school.
His uniform the same one I'd seen students wearing on the front page of the school's website.

When I remembered *what* had led me to do that research, a theory instantaneously came to mind. But I instantly rejected it. "Something that convenient couldn't actually happen."
I felt pathetic for even briefly entertaining such a ridiculous idea.

Noticing me looking at him, the boy blinked with a "What is it?" kind of look. I quickly averted my eyes. He looked at me curiously for a while. The modesty of his gaze just made me more nervous.
I watched the up-train leave. I watched the down-train leave.
We were suddenly alone in the station.

“Are you waiting for someone?”, the boy asked.
“No, nothing like that. I just...”
My words came to a halt. He waited for me to continue. But upon realizing that the words that would follow after “I just” were “feel comfortable next to you, so I don’t feel like leaving,” I had to close my mouth.
What was I about to say to this boy who I’d only just met? I was getting really overconfident about him just being a little nice to me.

After watching yet another train go, I spoke.
“Um... I’m grateful for your concern, but you don’t need to accompany me forever. I’m hardly unable to move from my injuries or anything. I’m just staying here because I want to.”
“We think alike. I’m just here because I want to be, too.”
“...Is that right?”

“Something kind of sad happened today,” he sighed. “I’m sure me running you over earlier was because I let myself be totally distracted by it. I know it’s no reason to moan to you about it, but the moment I leave here and I’m alone, I’m gonna have to face up to my sadness again. I don’t want to do that, so I’m not moving from this spot.”

He stretched and closed his eyes. The mood lightened, and I felt myself getting sleepy.

It wasn’t until some time later that I realized the person sitting next to me *was* the boy I adored.
Surprisingly, my “much too convenient theory” was almost

perfectly accurate to reality. Mizuho had waited thirty minutes, and when I didn't show, decided to head to my school directly on his bicycle, then ran me over on the way.
If we hadn't dodged the same direction and collided, we might have easily passed each other by. I was grateful for that happenstance.

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"There's something I need to confess," Mizuho said.
In my foolishness, I misinterpreted him as meaning a confession of love and was thrown into disarray. Having thought so much about how wonderful it would be if he felt the same way, I couldn't get around to considering the other possibilities.

Oh, what do I do? I was conflicted. While I very glad that Mizuho felt that way, there was no way I could respond to that. Because the girl he loved was someone separate from the "Kiriko Akazuki" who stood before him.
In truth, I should have told him right away: "It's not me who you love, but rather Kiriko Hizumi, the fictional person I've made up."

But the words got caught in my throat. As I imagined how, if I kept quiet for now, Mizuho would whisper sweet nothings to me, I immediately put aside my ethics, my conscience, and my common sense.
I could just tell him the truth after he'd confessed to me, my cunning side said. Once I've squeezed that brief happiness enough to crush it, I could reveal that I was Kiriko Akazuki, who had no right to his love, and endure his scorn.

Before the confession or after didn't make a major difference. With a life like this, I had to have at least a moment to dream.

"I've been hiding things from you ever since middle school, Kiriko."
He'd been thinking about me for that long? I grew happier, but also sadder. Probably because I'd been betraying Mizuho for that long, too. For that long, I'd played with him using my illusion of the non-existent Kiriko Hizumi.

My conscience had a second wind. "Um, Mizuho, I...", I bravely interrupted, but Mizuho spoke over me.
"I doubt you can forgive me now, but I still need to apologize to you."

Apologize?
At last, I noticed I was making a major misunderstanding. He wasn't confessing his love for me.
So then, what was he confessing? What was there to apologize for?

"*The "Mizuho Yugami" in the letters is entirely fictional,"* he told me. "He's no more than a person I made up to continue my correspondence with you. The person you see now, the real Mizuho Yugami, is someone completely different from the one in the letters."
"What in the world...?", I uttered, half with relief. "What do you mean?"
"I'll explain things in order."
And then I learned the truth.

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Having thought only of myself, when I heard Mizuho's confession, I was so shocked as to lose the chance to admit to my own lies.
I was glad that we had told the same sorts of lies for the same reasons since the same time, glad that his appearance and general air and speaking were just as I imagined them, so very, very, very glad, that it no longer seemed the time to reveal my own secrets.

After regaining some presence of mind, I heard some unthinkable words come out of my mouth.
"Is that right? Mizuho, you've been fooling me all along?"
What was I, the pot calling the kettle black?
"Yeah," he nodded.
"So really, you never had a single friend, did you?"
"Right," he nodded again.
"I see."

I stopped talking there, brought the empty can of milk tea to my lips, and pretended to sip it.
"I don't mind if you hate me," Mizuho stated. "I deserve it for what I did to you. Lying endlessly over five years. I came here today because I wanted to talk with age-seventeen Kiriko at least once. I don't want anything more. I'm satisfied."
He was a liar, but an honest liar, I thought to myself. And I was a dishonest liar.

"Hey, Mizuho," I cooed.
"What?"

“Please, at least answer this next question without lying. What were you thinking when you met me?”
He sighed. “I wanted you not to hate me.”

“In that case,” I began without delay, “I’ll be your friend.”
I, the one generally pleading for such a thing, took advantage of Mizuho’s honesty.
His eyes widened a little bit, and with a puff of laughter, he said “Thanks.”

Maybe this lie wasn’t necessary. If I were honest and revealed that I too had not a single friend, and was abused at home and at school, maybe Mizuho and I could feel a kind of codependency, and sink comfortably in a desperate, unhealthy, festering relationship.

But just once, I wanted to interact with someone as just a normal girl. Not scorned, nor pitied, without consideration of my family or my past, to be seen as me.
And most importantly, I wanted to attempt in reality - unilaterally, at that - the fantasies that had come to mind during our correspondence.

---

The first thing I did with my position was arrange for us spend more time together.
“Mizuho, you should spend more time with others,” I informed him. “Looking at you, your biggest problem seems to be that you’re used to your one-person rhythm. So first, you need to start learning the

rhythm of two people."
I only intended to make something up at random, but this was actually something that I personally thought about often.

"I get what you're saying," Mizuho affirmed. "But how?"
"You can just meet with me. More frequently."
"But won't that bother you, Kiriko?"
"Are you bothered, Mizuho?"
"No," he shook his head. "I'm glad."
"Well, I'm glad too."
"...I don't understand what you're talking about sometimes, Kiriko."
"That's because I think you don't need to understand."
"I see." He furrowed his brow.

We came to meet three days a week - Monday, Wednesday, and Friday - to spend our time after school together.
Since there was a danger of there being people who knew me at the train station, we changed our meeting place to a gazebo on the side of a walking path in the Western-style residential district a five-minute walk away.

It was a small gazebo with a green-painted hexagonal roof and one long seat. We sat in it with a CD player between us and listened to CDs, using an earbud each, with the person bringing the CDs switching off each time.
We had discussed music extensively in our letters, but given the nature of letters, we could only share in past experiences. Thus, being able to share an experience in the present tense was fresh and exciting.

Occasionally we'd let some thoughts leak out, or explain what we liked best about a song, but we generally just immersed ourselves in it in silence.
The cords on the earbuds connecting us were short, so we naturally leaned close to each other, and sometimes our shoulders would happen to touch.

"Kiriko, doesn't this make things kind of cramped?", Mizuho shyly asked.
"Indeed. But don't you think it's just right for getting you accustomed to people, Mizuho?"
I provided a valid-sounding logic to justify the distance. He just replied "Guess you're right," then fully leaned on my shoulder.
"You're heavy," I complained, but he ignored me, acting like he was too focused on the music.

Sheesh. I was dumbfounded. Not by Mizuho, but by myself. Using my position obtained with lies to make a boy do whatever I said.
It was a lowly act that couldn't be forgiven. Were I struck by lightning, hit by a meteor, or run over by a car, I would have no right to complain.

I need to tell him the truth someday, I told myself.
But every time I saw his humble smile, every time his body touched mine, every time he called me "Kiriko," my honesty was shaken.
Just a little longer. Can't I indulge in this dream for just a little longer? So the lies kept coming.

Yet a month after my reunion with Mizuho, a sudden end came to that relationship. My mask came off, and he saw my true colors.

---

After the money theft incident, my classmates treated me as a thief. There had long been completely baseless rumors about me being a prostitute, so I didn't think much of being called a thief now.
Unfortunately, this was a school full of sticky-fingered individuals where wallets and other items were pilfered almost daily, so responsibility for all of these events came to be pinned on me.
Even the theft of a student ID, from a third-year classroom which I'd never entered, was made out to be my doing. What benefit would it be to me to steal that?

After school, a group waiting shortly outside the gate caught me and scattered everything in my bag out on the road. They even searched through uniform pockets and my wallet.
I suspected this meant they'd already ransacked my locker and desk as well.

Of course, there was no reason for them to find the stolen student ID, so the search ended after about twenty minutes. But that didn't mean it was the end period.
The group pushed me into an irrigation ditch as revenge. There wasn't water running down it, but there was slimy mud with a rotten odor and nearly 20 centimeters of dead leaves.
As I landed, my foot slipped and I landed in the mud. Then the

contents of my bag came raining down on me one by one. The laughter gradually faded into the distance.

I felt a sharp pain in my thigh. In tripping, I'd been cut with a shard of glass or something, making a long wound that bled profusely.
In such a dirty place as this, it could get infected with bacteria. I have to get out of here quickly, I decided.

And yet my legs wouldn't move. It wasn't caused by the pain, nor the shock of seeing my grotesque wound.
I felt like something was tightly gripping my stomach, making it hard to breathe regularly. It seemed I could feel hurt just like anyone else.
This is nothing compared to middle school when you were pushed into the freezing pool in winter, I told myself.

Lying down face-up in the cold mud, I thought. This ditch is much deeper than I am tall. Even if I could leap up and grab the edge, it would be difficult to crawl out. There must be a ladder somewhere.
But before I find that, I have to gather up the contents of my bag. My notebooks and such are probably now useless, so I'll only take the minimum of what I need.
I'll give up on going to our rendezvous point today. I'll just say I was sick or something. As soon as I can get out, I'll head straight home, hand-wash my clothes, then throw them in the washing machine... Then I'll think about what to do next.

The CD I had brought to listen to with Mizuho landed close to me. I went to pick it up, and saw it had cracked.

I took a look around. Not only was it pitch black, there were fences on both sides of the ditch, so no one could even see me.

So for the first time in a while, I cried. I held my knees and huddled up, and let out sobs.
Once I'd started, the tears flooded out without resistance, and I forgot when to stop.

---

The people who had pushed me into the irrigation ditch didn't necessarily throw all of my belongings into the mud. A few printouts and notebooks were left on the road to be scattered by the wind.
One of them indirectly came to be picked up by Mizuho on his way home. His good hearing didn't overlook my crying mixed in with the wind.

I heard someone climbing over the fence and dropping down on my side. I quickly stopped crying and held my breath.
Whoever it was, I didn't want them to see me crying in the mud.

"Kiriko?", a familiar voice called, and my heart nearly froze over. I immediately laid my face down to hide myself.
Why? I was flustered. Why was Mizuho here? Why did he know it was me squatting down in a ditch?
"Is that you, Kiriko?", he asked again. I kept silent. But when he called my name again, I made up my mind to reveal myself.

Coming clean was something I would have to do someday. Trying to prolong it as I had only led to my lies being exposed in this terrible way.
This was my retribution.

I raised my face and asked, “How did you know I was here?”
He didn’t answer my question. “Ah, so it is you, Kiriko.”

Saying nothing else, Mizuho threw something up into the air, hopped down, and landed on his bottom in the mud. There was a splash, and a few drops of mud hit my face.
Then shortly afterward, a lot more came down. What he had thrown was his open school bag, so textbooks, notebooks, pencil boxes, etcetera all fell into the mud one by one.
He lay down face-up just as I had been doing. Not a care about his clothes and hair getting muddy.
We were both silent for a while.

“Hey, Kiriko.”
“Yes?”
“Look at that.” Mizuho pointed directly upward.

That’s right, I thought. It’s the winter solstice today.
We lay down together in the mud, looking up at the full moon.

---

I didn’t tell him about the wound on my thigh. I didn’t want to worry him any further.

As we walked through the dark ditch, making squishing sounds with our footsteps, I confessed all of my lies.
How I'd been lying in my letters since middle school. My family situation becoming tumultuous with the arrival of my stepfather and stepsister. Starting around the same time, being bullied at school as well, leaving me with nowhere to be. And all the details of the treatment I'd received.

Seemingly on purpose, he didn't make any sounds of affirmation or say apologetic things; he simply listened to me in silence.
I had once tried going to the school counselor who came once a week and telling him all my troubles, but the 24-year-old college graduate would only give annoyingly exaggerated and formal responses whenever I said anything.
This came off to me as an extreme appeal to the fact that they were listening, and I distinctly remember how uncomfortable that forced "sincerity" made me.
So Mizuho lending me an ear and shutting up during it made me happy.

I just wanted him to know how I really was; I didn't seek pity. So even when it came to the subject of domestic violence and abuse, I made an effort to explain it as indifferently as possible.
It still didn't change the fact that I was worrying him. Anyone hearing such a serious opening of my heart would surely feel some kind of a sense of duty. "I need to tell her something comforting."

But no such magic words existed. My problems were too involved,

and no practical solutions could be seen. And acknowledgments like "That sounds rough" or "You're amazing for putting up with that" were long past the point of being helpful.
Unless they had been in the same situation as me, and were in fact able to overcome it, all consoling words rang hollow.

Indeed, is it really possible for one person to comfort another? If you take things to their logical conclusions, all people but yourself are just outsiders.
People are capable of including wishes for others' sakes inside wishes for their own sake. But perhaps it's impossible for them to purely wish for another. Perhaps in a broad sense, there always has to be something in it for them.

Maybe he was thinking similar thoughts. He wordlessly grabbed my hand as I talked on about the pain that had been inflicted upon me. It was my first time holding hands with a boy.
I only meant to hide my embarrassment, but I said something that sounded like I was thrusting him away.
"But I suppose telling you about this won't accomplish anything, Mizuho."

His grip weakened momentarily. Mizuho was sharp enough to see the intent behind my statement.
Yes, I was implicitly asking: *Can you save me?*

The silence lasted for about thirty seconds.
He spoke to me. "Hey, Kiriko."
"What is it?"

Suddenly, Mizuho grabbed my shoulders and pushed me against the wall behind me. He did these actions gently, so I didn't hit my head or back on the wall, but they seemed so unlike Mizuho, I was too flustered to joke.
He brought his mouth to my ear and whispered.

"If you ever really do come to hate it all, just tell me. Then I can kill you."

I thought it was a rather well-thought-through reply for him.
"...You're a cold person, Mizuho."
I said something I didn't mean, because if I'd said anything like "Thank you," I would have started to cry.
"Yeah. Maybe I am a cold person," he smiled lonesomely.

I put my hand around his back and slowly pulled him close.
He responded with a similar action.

I knew. That statement that seemed deranged at a glance was proof that he was, with total seriousness, thinking of a way to save me.
His conclusion was that *that* was the only way to do something about things which nothing could be done about.

The most essential thing was not that I would be killed, but that *Mizuho would kill me.* The boy I trusted most promised to, should the time come, put the final period on all of my pain.
I'd never heard a more comforting promise. Not before then, and perhaps I never would again.

---

I showered and got a change of clothes at Mizuho's house. Apparently, his parents always came home after midnight.
While my uniform was being washed, we found ourselves briefly at a loss, and just for a bit, interacted in ways normal for an adolescent boy and girl.
To others, it would probably seem like insignificant playing around, but for someone living a life like mine, it was a major milestone that gave me peace of mind for days.

Us getting together was as unhealthy and exitless a relationship as could be.
But upon further consideration, there had been no exit to begin with, so I could feel relief as I plunged into the bottomless swamp.

---

While the distance between our hearts grew closer, on the surface, our usual relationship continued.
The only changes to speak of were that we met twice as often after school, and when we listened to music together, Mizuho would now wrap the dark red scarf he wore around my neck as well.

The color left the scenery, and it started to snow instead of rain - a rat-gray winter arrived.
One day, we huddled up in coats as usual and listened to music in the gazebo. I yawned endlessly, having gotten almost no sleep

yesterday and the day before.

Mizuho smiled bitterly. “Bored?”
“No, no that at all,” I replied, rubbing my eyes. “Recently, they started reconstruction work at the library I usually go to.”
That alone didn’t make much sense, so I added on an explanation about how I slept in the library study room whenever I needed sleep.

“So you can’t sleep at home, huh?”
“No, especially not lately. My stepsister’s friends have been coming and going as they please. My stepfather can sleep through any noise, so he isn’t bothered by it. Last night, they woke me up at 2:30 AM and conducted an ear-piercing experiment.”
I moved my hair over my ear and showed the two small holes in it. Mizuho brought his face close and stared.

“I think they’ll heal up soon if I leave it, but I haven’t used any disinfectant or ointment, so I’m a little worried.”
“Didn’t it hurt?”
“Not especially. The piercing only lasted for a moment.”

Mizuho ran his fingers along the fresh wounds. “I’m ticklish,” I warned, which he found amusing. He touched my ear all over with all his fingers as if trying to determine its shape in complete darkness.
Having the back of my ear and earlobe touched sent shivers to my brain, and I felt somehow guilty about it.

“Lately, even when my stepfather and stepsister don’t bother me, I’ve come to be opposed to sleeping at home. The library is where I can sleep the most. I can’t lie down, and the chair is hard, but there are CDs and books, it’s very quiet, and last but not least, I don’t have to see anyone I don’t want to.”

“And now that library’s under renovations?”
“It seems I won’t be able to use it for twenty more days, at least. I just wish there were somewhere else like that.”

Mizuho stopped fiddling with my ear and pondered. He put his hand to his chin and closed his eyes.
Then had had a realization.

“I know one place that fulfills almost all your requirements, Kiriko.”
“...Hm? I want to know. Urgently.”
I leaned forward, and Mizuho unnaturally averted his gaze.

“The selection is definitely inferior to the library, but there are some books that aren’t bad. And you can listen to music too, of course. It’s surrounded by trees, so it’s eerily quiet, and there’s no kind of closing time. And not only does it not cost a thing, you can lie down there.”

Then he looked into my eyes. “But there’s one serious flaw.”
I asked, holding in my laughter, “Is it that it’s where you usually sleep, Mizuho?”
“Exactly,” he nodded. “So I can’t really call it a good suggestion.”
“I’ll be honest with you and say that to me, that’s a major positive.

If it's not a problem with you, I'd like to intrude right away."
"...Then let's stop here with music for today."
Mizuho stopped the CD player and took the earbud out of my ear.

---

I'd never gone into any boy's room but Mizuho's. So the fact that his room was almost otherworldly in its lack of liveliness and its lack of *things* could be indicative of his personality, or just how boys' rooms generally are - I wouldn't be able to tell.
But I could tell that a giant bookshelf almost touching the ceiling with every shelf packed to the brim wasn't something to expect in every 17-year-old high school boy's room. As I approached, I faintly smelled old paper.

Changing into the bedwear Mizuho loaned me and rolling back the sleeves three times, I called outside the door, "You can come in."
Mizuho looked at me, now in his middle school jersey, curiously. His gaze tickled me, so I pointed to the bookshelf to redirect it there.

"I'm surprised. That's an impressive amount of books."
"Well, it's not like I've read them all," he explained self-derisively. "It's not like I even like books. It's more of a collection habit, if I had to say. I just like going around bookstores and buying any books I see mentioned all the time in magazines - the ones worth "giving my trust," I guess."

"So you're studious."
He shook his head. "I'm quick to cool off, so I get tired of things as

soon as I start them. So I figured I might as well make the thing that seemed most boring to me my hobby. Why do you think that is?"
"Because there was a low risk of disappointment, right?"
"Right. And while I was patiently searching around for something, even if I didn't come to like reading, I came to understand the feelings of people who like reading. A big step forward." He straightened the creases in the bedsheets, pulled up the blanket, and adjusted the position of the pillow. "But let's not talk anymore for now. It's ready. Sleep as much as you like."

I sat down on the cool sheets, slid under the covers, and rested my head on the pillow.
Even I knew my movements were awkward. But telling me not to be nervous was futile. If ever there was a girl who didn't get nervous sleeping in the bed of a boy she loved, she'd probably already lost something that makes her human.

I was enveloped in Mizuho's scent. It was hard to describe, but the essential element was that it was someone else's scent. One that would never come from me.
The only time he hugged me was when we were in an irrigation ditch, so I had no idea, but I supposed it would smell like this if I buried my face in his chest.
And inside me, that smell was inextricably tied to a sense of security, enjoyment, and dearness. I briefly considered taking the blanket home with me in secret.

"I'll come back to wake you up at a good time. Well, good night."
Mizuho closed the curtains, turned off the light, and went to leave,

but I stopped him.
“Um, can you stay here until I fall asleep?”

He replied somewhat nervously. “I don’t mind at all, personally, but... What do you intend to do if I get any funny ideas?”
His face heated up a little, but I didn’t have to know that since the lights were out.

I see. So Mizuho did see me that way.
The thing I’d wanted to know all along - if his goodwill toward me was purely friendly, or if there were romantic elements to it as well - was now resolved. A warm feeling filled my chest.

“If that happens, I’ll pretend to be opposed,” I answered.
“That’s not good enough,” he laughed with embarrassment. “If I try to do anything to you, you can give me a good punch between the eyes. That’ll bring a coward like me back to my senses right away.”
“Understood. I’ll remember that.”
I committed it to memory: I’ll be sure to never punch him between the eyes.

Mizuho turned on a reading light and started on a book. I watched him with half-open eyes.
This sight might be one I’ll never forget for the rest of my life, I thought as I drifted to sleep.

---

Afterward, I borrowed the bed in his room frequently. Once I

changed into bedwear and got under the covers, Mizuho would put on music at a barely-audible volume, and slowly lower it as my senses dimmed.
Once I woke up from my sound sleep, he'd pour me warm tea. Then I'd get on the back of his bicycle and he'd take me home.

After the first time I noticed while dozing off that Mizuho would neatly realign the blanket if it got askew, I taught myself how to naturally turn over in my sleep to shift it enough to warrant realignment.
The hard part was keeping myself from grinning right after he gently grabbed and pulled up the covers. Keeping it from showing as a smile meant keeping that warmth inside, and my feelings of yearning for him grew a size.

One time, he looked at my face up close. I had my eyes closed, but I could hear his breathing and tell he was squatting next to the bed.
Ultimately, though, Mizuho didn't do anything. If he had, I probably would have eagerly accepted it. No, I was waiting for it, really. I would have been happy if he got any "funny ideas."
After all, he was seventeen, and I was seventeen. 17-year-olds were creatures bursting with this and that which they can't control.

But still, I suppose I didn't desire anything more than him there reading, and soundly sleeping while everything remained ambiguous.
Until we both just couldn't bear it anymore, I decided I'd like to soak in this perfection made from imperfection.

Mizuho sat on the bed, and I put my head on his lap.
Sing me a lullaby, I selfishly asked. He quietly hummed Blackbird.

---

As we relaxed in this way, the end steadily approached. I was vaguely aware of this, but it crept up at an unbelievably faster pace than I'd thought.

If we'd known we had less than a month left, no doubt we would have quickly conveyed every inch of our feelings for each other, and tried out all sorts of things which lovers do.
But that wasn't to be.

---

A gloomy Saturday at the end of December, I took Mizuho out to a distant town. Riding the train for about an hour, we arrived at a station so small it might be mistaken for a dump.
Spider webs which had lost their owners hung around the waiting room, and a single wool glove was left on the platform.

We arrived, after thirty minutes of walking, at a public graveyard on a hill. Gravestones dotted the cleared field. Among them was my father's grave.
I didn't bring flowers or incense. I just touched my hand to the grave, sat down in front, and told Mizuho about my father.

They weren't significant memories worth calling memories, but I

liked my father. When I was little, and I was feeling down because my mother scolded me or things didn't go well with my friends, he would invite me to go on a drive with him.
Driving around the empty country roads and playing antique music on the car stereo, he would explain the good qualities of the songs such that even a child like me could understand. He was also the one who told me Pete Townshend's quote.
Perhaps the reason I came to listen to music in such an indulgent way was because I sensed his presence in it. A symbol of the time when my house was peaceful, and I didn't have to worry about anything.

As I finished up talking about my father, I suddenly broached a different subject.
"My stepfather has been building up a loan. I thought it would happen someday with his frenzied gambling, but it's gotten far larger than I could have imagined. It can't possibly be paid back through normal means now. Plus, the people he's borrowing from don't seem like the honest sort, and since it was caused by gambling, it would be hard to claim personal bankruptcy."

The conflict between my parents was unending. Perhaps feeling a little guilty about it this single time, my stepfather hadn't turned to violence over it yet, but it was only a matter of time.
I had the feeling that the next time he had the chance, he would do something - I didn't know what - which there was no recovering from.

I wouldn't be able to postpone my stepfather's actions. The massive

debt he accumulated would no doubt ruin my life.
But that sort of slow, bit-by-bit unhappiness wouldn't activate my magic. What it took to have the necessary scream of my soul was sudden, focused, simply-understood pain.
In addition, even if I could "undo" the debt, there was no guarantee he wouldn't repeat the same mistake. Ultimately, my magic was hardly any use at all.

I stood up and wiped some dirt off my clothes.
"All right, Mizuho. I'm beginning to get tired."
"I see."
"In what way are you going to kill me?"

He glared at me without answering. Something seemed to be bothering him. He'd never shown such an expression to me before, so I faltered.
Immediately after, Mizuho rather forcefully kissed me. Having our first kiss in a graveyard seemed so appropriate for us that I adored the hopelessness of it all.

---

Four days later, the time came at last.

Upon returning home, the first thing my eyes met was my mother's corpse.
No, by that time, maybe she wasn't a corpse just yet. Maybe she was in a condition from which, if she got immediate aid, she could have been saved.

But either way, by the time I checked her pulse hours later, she was dead.

My mother laid on the floor in a different outfit than usual, so I couldn't quite tell if it was truly my mother. That was how thoroughly her face had been beaten in.
Her head was a blank white.

My stepfather was sitting in a chair, pouring a drink into a glass. As I ran up to my mother, he sharply commanded, "Forget it."
I squatted next to her regardless, held my breath as I looked into her swollen, bloody face, and a moment later, felt the pain of a powerful blow to my temple.

My stepfather took me off the floor and dragged me up to my room. I huddled holding my knees, and he forcibly pulled my hair and punched the base of my nose.
My vision went red, and warm blood spilled out of my nose. Afraid of his violence being made public, he usually never aimed for the face, but this time the gloves came off.

"You wanna drive me out too, do you?", he asked. "Just try it. Whatever you do, I'll follow you all your life. You can't run from me. 'Cause we're family."

He punched me in the solar plexus, and I had trouble breathing. I anticipated a long storm. I put up my hands to desperately defend my face, at least, for when I saw Mizuho.
Completely separating my mind from my body, I filled my empty

head with music. I played through the track list of Janis Joplin's "Pearl" in order.
By the time A Woman Left Lonely ended, his assault briefly stopped. But it was simply because his fist was worn out from beating my mother for so long, so he switched to using a leather belt instead.

Swinging the belt like a whip, my stepfather struck me again and again. Each lash brought pain that made just living feel bothersome. Even after the last song - Mercedes Benz, a song that had been released only as an a cappella track, because Janis died from heroin overdose after going to buy Malboros with $5.50 in loose change - his stubborn violence showed no sign of ending.
I stopped thinking. I stopped looking. I stopped hearing. I stopped feeling.

---

I came to after fainting for the nth time
The storm had ended. I heard a beer can opening. The sound of munching nuts echoed through the room. Crunch, crunch, crunch. Crunch, crunch, crunch.

I didn't even have the energy to get up. I managed to move my neck to look up at the clock on the wall. Four hours had passed since I got home.
I tried to stand, but my hands were tied up. With those bands usually used for keeping cables together, I supposed. They were tied behind my back so I couldn't resist.

My body was covered in welts. My bloody blouse had half the buttons torn off, and the exposed skin from my neck down my back hurt like it had been burned.
No - *it probably had been burned.* That was the sort of pain it felt like, and there was an iron stand still plugged into the nearby outlet.

I felt something hard rolling around in my mouth. I didn't need to spit it out and check to know it was a molar.
I thought something tasted bitter, so it must have been the bleeding from where my tooth was broken. I could have gargled the blood.

Waiting until my father went to the bathroom, I crawled over to my unmoving mother and touched her wrist.
No pulse.

Before anything else, I thought, "If I stay here, I'll be killed too." I could grieve my mother's death after escaping to a safe place.
I just had to get away from that man. I crawled out of the living room, down the hall, and made it to the front door. Then with the last of my strength, I stood up and opened the door with my tied hands and got outside. Then I went back to desperately crawling.

My briefly-separated body and mind were hard to bring back together. I understood what had happened to me, but I couldn't yet feel the reality of it.
Now was when I should have "undone" everything, yet I saw it as being someone else's business. Maybe I had already been broken

long ago. How could I remain so calm after my mother was killed?

Someone grabbed my shoulder.
My spine froze up. I couldn't even scream. Paralyzed with fear, all my strength left me.

Once I realized it was Mizuho's hand, I was so relieved I could have fainted. And at last, the tears came. Drip, drip, drip, drip, they fell.
I didn't understand anything. Why was he here? I didn't want him to see me like this.

As soon as he removed the bands around my hands, I immediately covered my bloody and beaten face.
Mizuho took off his coat, put it on me, and hugged me. I clung to him and cried my eyes out.

"What happened?", he asked. He spoke extremely gently to try and calm me, but the shakiness of his breath told me of the murky emotions swirling in him.
I explained in a fragmented way that overlooked the point. My mother having collapsed when I got home. Being beaten when I ran over to her. Suffering through all kinds of violence for four hours afterward. My mother being dead by the time it was over.
He listened patiently, and quickly understood. He hardly needed any time to arrive at *the* decision.

"Just hold on. I should be able to end it quick."

With that, he went into my house. The question of what he was

thinking of doing didn't even arise in my frazzled mind.
I should have "undone" everything my stepfather did sooner. But my gratitude for Mizuho showing up got in the way, and my soul wouldn't scream.

Snow began to fall.

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Mizuho came back in less than five minutes.
Seeing his face and shirt bloodstained, bizarrely, gave me the thought that he was beautiful, rather than that it was lamentable.
The knife in his hands told the story of what exactly he had "ended."

"Liar," I accused. "You chose the wrong person to kill. Didn't you say you would kill me?"
Mizuho laughed. "Didn't you know I was a liar from the start?"
"...That is true, now that you mention it."

He'd made a mistake. It was the worst outcome I could conceive of. But I couldn't postpone that, either. It was impossible to undo the effort he had put forth for me.

"Hey, Mizuho."
"Yeah?"
"Let's run away. Somewhere at least a little far."

He walked with me on his back. He stole an unchained bicycle from

the train station, put me on the back, and pedaled.

We both understood that our elopement would lead nowhere. We had no intention of truly running away.
We just wanted time to say goodbye.

---

Once we're out of high school, let's live together, Mizuho said.
Though knowing it was impossible, I agreed.

---

He kept pedaling all night. The deep blue sky turned violet, then split into two layers of dull red and blue. Then the sun rose, and the bicycle pedaled on through morning rays.
Our cold bodies began to warm up, and the thin layer of snow on the road melted.

We stopped at a convenience store and bought chicken and cake. The clerk was an apathetic college student, so he rang our things up without a word about our faces. We sat on a bench and ate.

"Chicken and cake makes it feel like a birthday," I remarked.
"Well, it's a day to commemorate in a sense," he joked.

Grade schoolers looked curiously at the bloody and bruised high school couple eating party-like food early in the morning.
We looked dirty enough that one of them wondered, "Huh, is it

Halloween? Are they Halloween costumes?" We looked at each other and guffawed.

We started moving again. On the way, we passed a group of students from my high school. Seeing them enjoying themselves reminded me that today was the day of their culture festival. It seemed like an event in some other distant world entirely.
There were quite a few of those who bullied me among the group. They were stunned seeing me, covered in bruises, riding on the back of a bike and being pedaled away from the school by a boy covered in blood.

I buried my face in Mizuho's back and sobbed as I laughed, laughed as I sobbed. I felt like a poison that had infested my body for so long was finally being washed away.

---

Lastly, we went to an amusement park. That was my wish. I wanted to go to an amusement park with Mizuho just once. The same one I'd spent happy times at with my father and mother.

His bloody shirt and my bloody blouse were hidden under coats, but the bruises on my face and the smell of blood on him couldn't be concealed.
Passersby stared at us, sensing an air of violence about us unfitting for the park. But Mizuho and I paid it no mind, walking around holding hands.

He said he wanted to ride the Ferris wheel, and I said I wanted to ride the roller coaster. After a brief, innocent quarrel, he gave in, and we rode the roller coaster first.
And around that point, my memories got unclear.

All I could faintly remember was this: *the accident happened right after getting on the roller coaster.*

Maybe it was divine punishment. Not toward Mizuho, but toward me.
A sound. Shaking. A feeling of floating. Metal. Screams. Confusion. Another sound from beside me. Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch. Blood splatter. Screams. Confusion. Blood splatter. Meat. Screams. Puking. Crying.

When I came to, Mizuho was gone, and in his place was something that was formerly Mizuho.

---

This is what I thought.
Because he met me, Mizuho became a murderer.
Because he met me, Mizuho died a horrible death.
Everything was my fault.

If I weren't there, then this wouldn't have happened.
Mizuho shouldn't have met me.
All this time, I'd thought my stepfather was the bringer of misfortune.

But I was wrong. That was me.

I called my stepfather and stepsister to me, I killed my mother, and I killed Mizuho.
To the bitter end, I only brought trouble to him.

---

I heard the sound of a music box that I hadn't heard in a long time.
I performed a postponement on a larger scale than ever before. I went all the way back to that day months ago, and "undid" the reunion of Mizuho and I. I had no right to meet him.

But "Kiriko Hizumi" had done no wrong. I didn't need to erase her existence as well, the girl who gave him support.
So I only undid the reunion. I erased him coming to see me, and returned him to his regular high school life.

This should be best. Without me, Mizuho should be able to make friends, fall in love, and live normally.
And I forgot everything. Everything he said to me. Everything he did for me. The warmth of his hands. The memories he gave me.
Because merely thinking of him might infect him with my contagious unhappiness.

---

After undoing our reunion, I stopped aging. A year passed, and I remained 17, just the way I was in my second year of high school.

In essence, I was apparently postponing growing old, but I didn’t remember doing such a thing.

Maybe somewhere in my heart, I had a reluctant thought. “I at least want to stay how I was when he loved me.”
And so I unconsciously awaited the day of our reunion.

# Chapter 10: Good Night

Now that Kiriko's magic was fading, everything she "undid" was being returned to its proper state.

It seemed the accident that killed me led to this park being shut down and abandoned.
It had fallen into ruin. Everything was left half-destroyed, as if they gave up in the middle of dismantling it.

We exited the gondola filled with dead leaves. I turned around and saw the rusted Ferris wheel without any power lightly swaying in the frigid wind.
No one was in the control booth, and shattered glass lay all around it.

Kiriko and I were the only ones left in the park.

"When did you notice I was Mizuho Yugami?", I asked.
"On Halloween, when I fell asleep on your shoulder on the train, I had a nostalgic feeling," Kiriko replied. "That led me to realize it."

Carefully stepping down the stairs full of holes, we held hands and walked around the park.
Not all the lights were dead, necessarily; a few remaining ones still flickered. The pavement was cracked all over, and weeds grew up from the cracks.
Ivy wrapped around the fence surrounding the merry-go-round, the white horses were stripped of paint, and some of the carriages had

fallen over.

The boarding platform for the roller coaster had susuki grass growing on it, and the cars were covered with a blue sheet.
Walking along the mossy rails, we saw a pile of wreckage in an unfilled pool underneath. Benches, signs, two-seater bicycles, go-karts, tents, toy soldiers missing their arms, clowns without noses, skates, tires, oil drums, iron slopes, drab flower and bird statues.

I asked a question.
“Kiriko, why could you not postpone your death for even a month, yet be able to postpone someone else’s death for more than five years?”
“It should be easier to understand thinking in reverse,” she suggested. “I just couldn’t postpone my own death for five years.”

I could accept that. Maybe I didn’t need to ask her why.
I felt I also understood now why Kiriko’s revenge on her father had only been hitting him with a hammer. I had already carried out the revenge on him. The revenge she conducted was only continuing on from there.

And then, the last question.
If Kiriko’s death meant everything she “undid” would go back to normal, what would happen to us?

Once the postponement of the accident in which I ran Kiriko over was fully repealed, Kiriko would die.
And as soon as Kiriko died, her postponement of the accident at this

park in which I died would be repealed, and I wouldn't exist to run Kiriko over.
It was a situation comparable to the "grandfather paradox" in the notion of time travel, only with life and death completely switched.

Would Kiriko survive? Just as I began to wonder, Kiriko spoke.
"Once you're gone, Mizuho, I think I'll follow soon after. As settlement for all my crimes, as well."
"No, I can't allow it," I responded. "Whatever happens, I want you to keep living."
Kiriko bumped her head into my back. "Liar."

I had no response. She was right; I was a liar. I should have been glad she would follow after me in death.

"...Also, how much longer do you think we'll have to wait?", I asked.
"Just a little longer," she answered with a lonely smile. "Just a little."
"I see."

My mind turned to my impending death. But I couldn't be particularly sad about it.
Now that my memories were back, I knew that I had been the salvation of at least one girl. My soul was able to properly burn bright.
What more could I want?

After getting off the rails and going around to all the attractions, we sat together on an iron bench in front of the Ferris wheel.

Just like the days when we listened to music together in the gazebo, each using an earbud.

A small white drop of light passed in front of my eyes. I didn't notice it was snow until my eyes focused.
That's right, I remembered. They'd said on the radio that the first snow would be coming sooner this year.
The snowflakes gradually got big enough to see without straining my eyes.

"I'm glad we could see this one last time," I said.
"Yes."
I noticed Kiriko's tone had changed slightly, and turned my gaze toward her.
She was no longer seventeen.

"Hey, Mizuho," 22-year-old Kiriko said. "Do you hate me?"
"Well, how about you, Kiriko? Do you hate me for running you over?"
She shook her head. "The time I spent with you was my real life. You breathed life into me. I can let you off on killing me once or twice."
"Then that makes this easy. I feel the same way."
"...Is that right?"
Saying "thank goodness," Kiriko put her right hand on my left. I flipped it over and put my fingers between hers.

"It might be worthless to say this now, but..."
"What is it?"

“I love you, Kiriko.”
“I know.”
“See, I told you it was worthless.”
“I love you too, Mizuho.”
“Yeah, I know.”
“Then can I have a kiss?”
“Let’s do it.”

We brought our faces close.
“Oh, come to think of it,” Kiriko said just as we were about to kiss.
“It seems “that thing” didn’t exist after all.”
“Way to remember letters from such a long time ago.”
“So you’re saying you remember it too, Mizuho?”
“Yeah,” I nodded. “And I guess “it” isn’t just a kind lie.”
“So it seems,” Kiriko smiled. “I’m glad to know that in the end.”

We put our cold lips together.
As we did, the speakers began playing music to announce closing time.
Right on cue, even the meager light remaining fell away.
The park was swallowed up by the night.

---

I hate this world. Even so, I think it’s beautiful.
There are countless things too sad to bear, and irrational things I can’t forgive, but I don’t regret being brought to this world as a person rather than a flower, a bird, or a star.

The letters Kiriko and I exchanged day by day. The music we listened to leaning on each other. The moon we looked up at from the mud. The warmth of her hand in mine. Our first kiss in the graveyard. The rhythm of her breathing as she leaned on me. The piano we played together in my dim apartment.
As long as I had such beautiful memories, I could turn my back to the world and hold hands with it.

In the end, I had a vision of a merry-go-round. Or maybe it was a world Kiriko used the last of her strength to show me, one where all sadness had been “undone.”
We sat on the horses, laughing together, both at child age. We reached out at each other, and our fingertips touched.
Wooden horses swinging up and down like a cradle, music like from a nursery, bright lights twinkling in the darkness.

I wanted that vision to last forever, but it was as fleeting as the flame of a match.

Snow piled on my shoulders and head. My eyelids came down, and my senses slowly faded into the distance.
An end was coming to these lovable days full of lies and mistakes.

The only appropriate thing to leave Kiriko with, after she’d lived a life filled with more pain than anyone, was that foolish consolation.
I gently stroked her head, then pushed out those words.

Pain, pain, go away.

## Afterword

There are a lot of holes to fall into around here. That was the way I, at least, came to see the world.
Small holes, big holes, shallow holes, deep holes, easily-seen holes, hard-to-see holes, holes no one had yet fallen in, holes many had fallen in.
Truly, a wide variety. Thinking about each and every one of them made me too uneasy to take a single step.

When I was young, I liked stories that let me forget about the holes. And not just I, but everyone seemed to like writing stories that described a safe world, where all the holes had covers put over them. We might call them “sterilized stories.”
Of course, the protagonists don’t have only good things happening to them, and in fact experience an above-average amount of suffering and hardship.
But ultimately, it all helps them to mature, and give them a reassuring feeling that “people can accept anything and live.” That’s the way of those stories.
I think that we don’t wish to induce sadness in our fiction as well.

But one day, I suddenly realized I was in a dark hole. I fell in most irrationally, without any prior warning. It was an extremely small and hard-to-see hole, so I couldn’t hope for others’ help.
Yet luckily, the hole was not deep enough that I couldn’t crawl out, so over a long period of time, I made it out by my own power.

Once back on the surface, basking in the warm sun and clean wind again, I thought. No matter how careful people are, they never know when they'll run into a pitfall. That's the way of our world.
And perhaps the next hole I fall into could be a deeper one. Deep enough that I'd never make it back here again. What, in that case, am I to do?

Following that, I stopped earnestly reading those "stories that plug up the holes" I described previously. Instead, I came to prefer stories that portrayed "people getting along happily in holes."
Because I thought, I want to hear the story of the person who, in a dark, deep, narrow, cold hole, can smile without it being a bluff. To me, there might not be anything more consoling than that.

"Pain, Pain, Go Away" was the story of people who fell into a hole they could never again escape. Yet I wrote it intending it not to be purely a gloomy story, but a cheerful one too.
It really may not appear that way, but it is. It is.

- Sugaru Miaki